



# LUDVIG HOLBERG

(1684–1754)

Learning and Literature  
in the Nordic Enlightenment

Edited by  
Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen



# Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754)

Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754) was the foremost representative of the Danish–Norwegian Enlightenment and also a European figure of note. He published significant works in natural law and history, but also a very important body of moral essays and epistles. He authored several engaging autobiographies and European travelogues, a major utopian novel that was an immediate European success, interesting satires that advocated women's education and careers, and a large number of comedies. These comedies secured Holberg's status as the most significant playwright in Scandinavia before Ibsen and Strindberg. Through his extensive *oeuvre*, but especially through his plays, Holberg had a decisive influence on the formation of modern Danish as a literary language, something that was a self-conscious effort on the part of a man who saw himself as an educator of the public. Despite his contemporary impact at home and abroad, and his ongoing popularity in Scandinavia, he remains little known in the wider world of Enlightenment studies. It is the aim of this volume to revive Holberg as a major figure from a minor corner of the Enlightenment world, by presenting the full variety of his work and giving it a European context.

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Nordic Enlightenment

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# Preface

The name of Ludvig Holberg is unfamiliar in the world at large, except from the title of Edvard Grieg's Holberg Suite. In the Nordic countries it is very different. Here Holberg is popularly known as the author of comedies that are as stable presences in the theatrical repertory as the plays of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. In Denmark and Norway, Holberg is in fact one of the defining figures of the respective national cultures and has a standing comparable to that of Søren Kierkegaard, Hans Christian Andersen and Henrik Ibsen. Yet he obviously does not have anything like the international name of these three.

Both the domestic renown and the lack of international fame are obstacles for an adequate historical understanding of Holberg. The former has created an extensive literature, both scholarly and more popular, nearly all of it in the respective vernaculars. Literary historians and cultural commentators have to articulate their attitude to Holberg, and playing one particular theatrical role of his is a rite of passage for male actors somewhat comparable to the role of Hamlet for British actors. There is, therefore, more than two and a half centuries' of investment of intellectual endeavour in Holberg as this important figure, and in the last couple of generations, there is hardly a good liberal cause that has not been attributed to him by some commentators, only to be disputed by others. All this has the intensity of the small national culture in search of greatness, and is – not surprisingly – stoked by the occasional squabble as to whether the man *really* was Norwegian or Danish. In light of this, it is also not surprising that there is a certain anxiety about persuading the rest of the world that it ought to know and recognize the greatness. Occasionally this has the usual expressions in the form of embarrassingly exaggerated claims and Lilliputian chest beating. In other words, there is here a case where a cool historical look seems particularly needed. However, there is no doubt that even in the coolest historical light, Holberg remains an intriguing figure, though not perhaps in quite the way commonly thought.

Although written by Danes and Norwegians, this book attempts to step back from the revered figure by presenting him to an audience that is unfamiliar with Holberg's work and with the legends that have grown up



around him but may be curious about local variations of general themes. Reflection on Holberg contributes to a better understanding of Europe's many 'enlightenments'. This means also and especially that we have tried to write for people who do not master the language in which he wrote nearly all his works, Danish. For this reason, too, we have included a brief survey of the limited translations of Holberg into English (Chapter 11). At the same time, we are very conscious of writing in the context of ongoing Danish and Norwegian scholarship, and we are happy to acknowledge our general debt to this work.

The general approach taken here is that of contextual intellectual history. Context is of course a very flexible concept, and it is not difficult to imagine studies that would invoke much wider contexts than those we have attempted. However, one particular context has been defining for the book as a whole, namely, that provided by Holberg's own works. We have avoided the common practice of privileging certain parts of Holberg's complex oeuvre and instead tried to deal with all his major genres and subjects, thereby at least indicating the intellectual context in which each of these was dealt with by the author. Thus the well-known comedies and satirical works are discussed along with the virtually forgotten church history and Jewish history. There is much more to be done along those lines, and if our limitations can spur others on to do more, we will be gratified. In order to give an impression of the complexity and wide range of Holberg's work, we have tried to relate the individual chapters to each other, but we do not pretend to – indeed do not want to – speak as if with one voice.

The book is a fruit of the project 'Holberg's Ideologies' that was conducted at the University of Bergen during 2013 and 2014. The project was expertly directed by Jørgen Magnus Sejersted and generously funded by the Norwegian Research Council. Drafts of the chapters were discussed at several meetings of the authors in Bergen and Copenhagen. On the last occasion in June 2015 we had invited Dr Tim Hochstrasser (London School of Economics and Political Science) and Professor Marie-Christine Skuncke (University of Uppsala) to be our first critical readers, and we are deeply grateful to them for their excellent constructive criticism of our second-last drafts. Finally, we are glad to acknowledge the free use of illustrations in the keep of Sorø Akademi and Kristoffer Schmidt (The photographs were made by Kristoffer Schmidt).

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Copenhagen  
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# Method for references

All titles referred to in the text are included in the bibliographies (pp. 233–48). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Holberg’s works are to the new digital edition *Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter*, which is publicly available at: <http://holbergsskrifter.dk>, and at <http://holbergsskrifter.no>.

This part of the bibliography also provides our English translations of titles in *Holbergs Skrifter*. When an English translation with a title different from ours is cited, this is clearly indicated in the notes and the edition is listed in the bibliography.

All references (whether by page or by chapter) not otherwise identified are to other parts of the present work.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from non-English texts are by the authors or editors.





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# Introduction





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# Introduction, part 1: Holberg's life and career

*Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen*

## It all began in Bergen – or did it?

A traditional biography of the life and letters of the Danish-Norwegian playwright, moralist and historian Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754) would begin with his birth on 3 December 1684 (presumably) in Bergen, a thrifty city of merchants and fishermen well sheltered in the deep fjords on the west coast of Norway.<sup>1</sup> It would tell about young Holberg being one of twelve children (of whom six survived to adult age) born to Christian Nielsen Holberg (c. 1620–86), a professional soldier of humble origins, who ended his career as lieutenant colonel and commandant of Bergen fortification, and Karen Lem (1647–95), daughter of a well-entrenched dynasty of Danish-Norwegian clergymen. It would dwell on the fact that Bergen was an old and, in Danish-Norwegian terms, rather large and cosmopolitan city of more than 15,000 inhabitants and with a substantial German population. As we know absolutely nothing, it would be very plausible to imagine that this background was crucial for Holberg's later broad horizon and distaste for parochialism.

Turning to Holberg's personal life, his early biography would look rather gloomy: His father died before Holberg was two years old; later the same year (1686) a fire destroyed the family's home in the better part of the city; and when Holberg was 10 his mother died. As usual the extended family took care of the orphans and young Holberg first lived with a cousin of his mother who was the vicar of Fron in Gudbrandsdalen, later with another relative and eventually with his uncle, the merchant Peder Lem in Bergen, where he attended the local grammar school. Apparently he left Bergen for the University of Copenhagen at the very first opportunity in the summer of 1702 – the occasion being the devastating fire of Bergen on 19 May 1702 that destroyed the school as well as uncle Lem's house. He spent the following seven years studying theology in Copenhagen (passing the 'examen theologicum' in 1704) and travelling in the Netherlands (1704–05) and England (London, Oxford, 1706–08). Intermittently he tutored the children of different well-to-do clergymen and nobles and accompanied them on studies abroad, which was the typical thing to do for poor students looking for patrons and waiting for a position. In 1709 he obtained a stipend



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at Borch's College (the equivalent of a modern post-doctoral fellowship), and in 1712 the Rosenkrantz travelling grant which financed yet another European tour, this time to France and Italy (1714–16).

All of this would be entirely correct, but at the same time not very helpful, because it would suggest that by sketching Holberg's background and tracing his experiences we would be able to explain Holberg the man and his oeuvre as the expression of so many impressions.<sup>2</sup> Quite apart from the primitive and somewhat romantic psychology behind such an approach, it is an impossible strategy in Holberg's case. Not only is our knowledge of his early life patchy, to say the least, but almost all of it derives from his intriguing and extremely selective *Autobiographical Letters* and scattered remarks in his rather complacent forewords (cf. Chapters 1 and 2). If we step back a little it is, however, possible to sketch out a more meaningful if less soul searching biography that is not merely a mundane recapitulation of his very entertaining autobiography. So let us begin again but at a different point in time, neither with his birth, nor with his becoming an orphan, nor with his supposedly formative years in Bergen or his youthful travels, but in 1711 when he published his first book: *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States*, followed two years later by *Appendix to his* [sic] *Historical Introduction* (a topographical-political description of Germany, England and the Netherlands).<sup>3</sup> In other words: Let us begin with his birth as an author.

#### A self-made man

With these two books, Holberg not only made his debut as an author but also signalled his intention to break free of all local networks of kinship and patronage and place his bid in the free and fierce competition for royal patronage and public attention. This was no unrealistic dream. Since the introduction of absolutism in Denmark-Norway in 1660 it had been an established maxim of state that the king should never allow his closest advisors and the established elites a monopoly on patronage. Another deliberate absolutist policy had been centralization of all political and economic power and the concomitant career opportunities in the royal residence of Copenhagen. The logical consequence of this was a steady stream of bright young men from the provinces gravitating towards Copenhagen in the hope that they could attract the attention of the king. The king, on the other hand, was keen on recruiting talent wherever he found it and on asserting his independence through occasionally bypassing the recommendations of his regular advisors.

Holberg was one of these young men, and he was far from the only one. One could name another Norwegian, the naval hero Peter Wessel Tordenskiold (1690–1720), who like Holberg was a younger son (number fourteen!) from a well-to-do family of merchants, in this instance from the more northerly city of Trondheim. With a little help from a relative in Copenhagen, but mostly by dint of good seamanship, pluck and royal



favour, young Peter Wessel rose to the rank of admiral and was ennobled by the king under the suggestive name of Tordenskiold (Thundershield) while still in his twenties. Another example would be Holberg's younger rival as an historian and natural law teacher, Andreas Hojer (1690–1739), who came from the south-western periphery of the realm (the village of Karlum in the duchy of Schleswig). He tried to outdo Holberg with an intelligent German textbook on Danish history, *Kurtzgefasste Dännemärkische Geschichte* (Flensburg 1718), an offence for which Holberg never forgave him.

The *Introduction* (1711) and the *Appendix* (1713) were the first two parts of an ambitious programme that Holberg outlined in his prefaces and in a petition for a position at the University that he sent to King Frederick IV (ruled 1699–1730) around New Year 1714. He planned to complete the *Appendix* with four more volumes on the rest of the European states, publish a history of the 'last three kings' (Christian IV, Frederick III and Christian V, i.e. the period 1588–1699) and an introduction to natural law. As a surety he enclosed a folio manuscript with the history of Christian IV (ruled 1588–1648) and Frederick III (ruled 1648–1670). This convinced the king who named Holberg professor designate (i.e. without a salary but with an option on the next vacant position at Copenhagen University). Two years later, after an extended tour through the Netherlands, France and Italy, Holberg returned to Copenhagen and published *The Law of Nature and Nations* (1716), which, however, was no fruit of his travels but had lain completed since his departure in the spring of 1714. The reward was not long in waiting, for in December 1717 Holberg received a salaried position at the University as professor of metaphysics and logic. Three years later he changed to the professorship of eloquence (i.e. Latin literature) and in 1730 achieved his heart's desire, the professorship of history. The promised volumes of the *Appendix* never materialized, and the history of the three last kings was not published until 1729 as part of an exceedingly long chapter on the history of the Danish kings of the Oldenburg line in *Description of Denmark and Norway* (1729), later to be expanded into his three-volume *History of Denmark* (1732–5). Nevertheless, the overall picture is quite clear: Holberg tried to win royal favour by means of publishing politically correct textbooks in the vernacular on a number of useful subjects (topography, history, natural law) for the educated members of the commercial and bureaucratic middle class, and by and large he delivered. His success shows that his estimate of what was needed and what would win favour with Frederick IV was correct. And secure of royal favour, he could afford to look askance at academic mores.

### An unconventional professor

One of the constant features of Holberg's writings is his ridicule of pedantry. He had little respect for the trappings of traditional academic culture and



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never tired of venting his scorn for metaphysical speculation, university disputations and antiquarian scholarship. And he practiced what he preached. While at Borch's College he never participated in the obligatory disputations, and when he received the Rosenkrantz travel grant for theological studies at reliably Lutheran universities abroad, he first stayed at home for two years and then travelled to the Calvinist Netherlands and Catholic France and Italy! During his travels he behaved entirely as a modern, curious tourist and he does not seem to have made any friends or connections in the world of scholarship and letters. As a professor of metaphysics and logic he neglected his lectures as much as possible. When he had advanced to the chair of eloquence and held the position as the University secretary he was asked in 1720 to write a 'university programme' that invited the public to the annual conferment of the bachelor degrees. He composed a text that was so equivocal that the consistory at the last moment decided to discard it, and he was never asked again. The two known dissertations he composed are mock-dissertations aimed at his rival Hojer. The only evidence we have from his students describe him as a dull, disorganized lecturer. In 1737 he accepted the post as university treasurer on condition that he was relieved of his teaching duties. However, in 1733 he published two short Latin textbooks ('compendia') of universal history and geography which later were translated into English (cf. Chapter 11).

Turning to his vernacular works, it would seem that the moment Holberg obtained a salaried position at the University he dropped the remaining part of his projected 'textbook series.' For the next ten years he did something completely different; he later called it his 'poetical raptus.' It began in 1719 when he anonymously published a couple of fictive and satirical university disputations in Latin aimed at the above mentioned Andreas Hojer, the first against Hojer's *Kurtzgefasste dännemarkische Geschichte*, the second against his dissertation on consanguineous marriages (cf. Chapter 3). It is part of standard Holberg-mythology – based on Holberg's autobiography – that this dispute with Hojer made Holberg discover his talent for satire and, so to speak, awoke the dormant poet in his breast. Even if the disputations against Hojer were Holberg's first full-fledged satirical works it is difficult not to trace his satirical talent further back. His very first book, *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States*, contains occasional ironic remarks and – for the genre – many unusual colloquialisms. Not least the preface to the reader shows several instances of gentle, if not very subtle, irony and this goes for the *Appendix* too.

However, even if Hojer is innocent of liberating Holberg's poetic creativity it certainly burst violently forth in the following years. In the same year as the feud with Hojer, Holberg began publishing his mock-epic *Peder Paars* (1719–20) in which he demonstrated his command of classical literature by parodying it in Danish (cf. Chapter 6). Then followed the *Satirical Poems* (1722) in which he presented pastiches of classical satires, aimed at follies of his day. One of these follies was the restrictions on women's





*Figure 11.1* In 1730 Holberg at last succeeded to the chair of history and geography and in the following year he celebrated it with a fine engraving by the prolific Hamburg engraver Ch. Fritzsch. The portrait lends credence to Holberg's claim that he had a baby face well into middle age. The engraving is sometimes mistakenly described as the frontispiece for *The History of Denmark*. Photo: Kristoffer Schmidt from the collection of Sorø Akademi.



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education and employment which he ridiculed in the poem *Zille Hans-daughter's Gynaicologia or Defense of Womankind* (cf. Chapter 5). And last, from 1723 to 1731 in an enormous burst of poetical power, the many Danish comedies written for the newly established theatre in Grønnegade in Copenhagen. Even if all these satirical and poetical writings were anonymous or pseudonymous it was no secret that Holberg was their author, and they were a great success in Denmark as well as in Germany. In 1725–26 Holberg travelled via Amsterdam to Paris and tried to become a writer of European acclaim, but it seems that even if he was heavily inspired by French theatre and fascinated by the English Deists, France and England were not particularly receptive to his style and message.

To a posterity for which Holberg is simply ‘the father of Danish literature’ it can sometimes be difficult to imagine how provocative his extra-curricular activity was. It was about as respectable and acceptable as if a modern-day university don would spend his time writing crime stories and erotic poems while neglecting his teaching duties, making fun of his university and never publishing a line in a peer reviewed journal.

### Return to serious business?

In the late 1720s, Holberg returned to his original plan of writing the books he deemed necessary for an enlightened Danish reading public. It was a patriotic and politically edifying project that resulted in thousands of pages of topography, history, biography and natural law. The main titles are revised editions of *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States* (1728) and *The Law of Nature and Nations* (1728, third edition 1734, fourth 1741, fifth 1751), the long awaited *Description of Denmark and Norway* (1729, second edition 1749), the *magnum opus* *History of Denmark* (3 volumes 1732–5, second edition 1753–4), the homage to his home town *Description of Bergen* (1737), *General Church History* (1738), *Lives of Heroes* (1739), *Jewish History* (1742) and *Lives of Heroines* (1749). All of these historical works were published in German too. Even if none of these works can be termed scholarly or academic in the narrow sense one must say that Holberg fully delivered on the promises made when he petitioned the king for a position at the University.

However, it would be wrong to suppose that Holberg had now recovered from his ‘poetic raptus,’ and not only because he produced another spate of comedies in the 1750s when the ban on theatre that had been introduced by Christian VI in 1730 had been lifted. In addition to the serious textbooks he continued his series of satirical travesties – all of course with a moral philosophical message but also with much humour. In contrast to his vernacular poems and plays of the early 1720s, Holberg this time chose to publish in Latin, thus aiming at a more learned and international public. These works consist of three *Autobiographical Letters* (1728–43, cf. Chapter 2) and the partly utopian novel in the form of a travelogue, *Niels Klim's Travels*



*Underground* (1741, cf. Chapter 6) all of which were quickly translated into Danish and German.

Parallel to the serious and the satirical parts of his oeuvre, or maybe rather as a combination of them, Holberg around 1740 established himself as a moral philosopher and writer of numerous essays, first in the form of moral introductions and comparisons in the rather successful *Lives of Heroes* (1739) and *Lives of Heroines* (1749), then in the elaborate collection of long essays *Moral Reflections* (1744) and last but not least in the five volumes of *Epistles* (1748–54) totalling 539 short essays on a variety of themes (cf. Chapter 4).

## Holberg the man

Who was the man behind this impressive but also rather unconventional literary career? In fact, we know very little about Holberg as a person apart from what he himself chose to tell us in his entertaining but also very selective *Autobiographical Letters*. Based on the style of his comedies there exist a number of unreliable anecdotes depicting Holberg as a good natured prankster, but all available evidence, including Holberg's own words, point in the opposite direction. He was an unsociable bachelor with frail health and a bad temper. He had no close friends and disregarded most of the social obligations normally incumbent on a professor in relation to peers and family. He conversed with books and observed his fellow human beings but he only rarely entered into discussion. He despised letter writing, and instead of socialising he worked around the clock and walked the streets alone. As he said in the preface to his *Lives of Heroes*:

if you manage your time, abstain from irrelevant business, visits and social events then a year or two really amount to something; because every year consists of 365 days and every day of 12 to 14 useful hours, so a great deal can be done during that time.<sup>4</sup>

It is with good reason that the modern standard biography of Holberg bears the title 'The great loner.'<sup>5</sup> The sole crack in his armour was music. He played the recorder, organized soirées and attended concerts where astonished guests could observe the normally so gruff Holberg moved to tears.

Apart from being a prolific writer and a miser, Holberg was also a thrifty fellow. The income from his salary and perks, not to mention the profit he made from his most popular books, which he published and sold himself, he did not spend on respectable living or needy relatives. Instead he invested in loans against surety in real estate in Copenhagen and later in the countryside. Eventually in 1740 he bought a landed estate in western Zealand where he spent his summers and indulged in the landowner's favorite pastime, litigation.

It was without doubt a good choice when Holberg in 1737 became university treasurer and thus responsible for the University's economy, whose



backbone was the tithes from a great number of Zealand parish churches and tenant farms. The post demanded constant vigilance and the ability to strike hard bargains with tenants as well as lessees.

Being a bachelor, Holberg early gave thoughts to the problem of his inheritance. In the introduction to the third volume of *History of Denmark* (1735) he signalled that he would destine the profits he made by publishing to public use in the shape of a foundation for the improvement of Danish language and letters. Eventually he chose something different and bequeathed his property to Sorø Academy, a noble academy for the education of civil servants in the vicinity of his estate. For this he was made a baron in 1747, a somewhat ironic step for an author who had always championed the cause of the burgher class. When he died seven years later he was awarded a monumental burial in the old monastery church of Sorø, resting place of a couple of medieval kings and queens as well as bishop Absalon (died 1201), whose clerk Saxo Grammaticus wrote *Gesta Danorum* and thus was Holberg's predecessor as author of a full-length national history.

A copper engraving intended for a French edition of *Moral Reflections* (1749), but not used and only published in a revised and more life-like version after his death (cf. cover image), bears the following inscription by one of Holberg's young admirers, Bolle Luxdorph:

This is he by whose pen wisdom, law,  
history as well as witty satires shone forth.  
While improving, delighting and instructing the fatherland,  
he wrote more and better than any other man.

Wisdom (the essays), law (natural law), history and satires make up a neat summary of a prolific writing career. In hard numbers and with a different system we talk about the following published works:

- twelve works of history and topography ranging from his three volume national history through textbooks on European history to a couple of pamphlets;
- two large collections of biographies (heroes and heroines) spiced up with moral(ising) philosophy;
- five works of moral philosophy including his textbook on natural law, seven volumes of essays and two collections of epigrams and fables;
- five verse satires in Danish;
- two prose satires in Latin consisting of his autobiographical letters and a Latin novel;
- thirty-three comedies;
- nine academic pieces in Latin, including two small textbooks, a couple of speeches, a letter and a pair of mock dissertations;
- four miscellaneous writings: A couple of prefaces, a didactic dialogue on mercantilist policy, an essay on cattle plague.



The modern critical edition, *Ludvig Holbergs Samlede Skrifter*, edited by Carl S. Petersen (Copenhagen 1913–63), comprises eighteen handsome but unwieldy folio volumes. The modern reader is, however, well advised to use the new scholarly digital edition at [www.holbergsskrifter.dk/](http://www.holbergsskrifter.dk/) and at [www.holbergsskrifter.no](http://www.holbergsskrifter.no).

## Notes

- 1 The most recent, comprehensive and reliable biography of Holberg is Lars Roar Langslet, *Den store ensomme – en biografi om Ludvig Holberg* (Oslo: 2001). A slightly revised Danish edition with the same title appeared in 2002.
- 2 This is the approach dominating the rather celebratory anthology Sven Hakon Rossel, ed., *Ludvig Holberg: A European Writer. A Study in Influence and Reception* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: 1994).
- 3 For full bibliographic details on all of Holberg's works, including detailed information about reprints, translations, prices and reception, the reader is referred to H. Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi over Holbergs skrifter* (Copenhagen: 1933–5) (= vol. 10–12 of H. Ehrencron-Müller, *Forfatterlexikon omfattende Danmark, Norge og Island indtil 1814*, 1–12 vols + 2 supplements (Copenhagen: 1924–39).
- 4 *Adskillige store Heltes og berømmelige Mænds, sær Orientalske og Indianske sammenlignede Historier*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: 1739) vol. 1, fol. 4 r.
- 5 Cf. note 1.





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# Introduction, part 2: the author and the work

*Knud Haakonssen*

The biographical profile and career path traced in the first part of this Introduction have amply shown that Ludvig Holberg was at one and the same time an establishment figure and something of a maverick. His lack of sociability, contrariness and tendency towards professional jealousy may not in themselves have been unusual for his kind, but they were combined with a restless mind that pursued a bewildering variety of paths untypical of a settled professor. The most striking example of this was his role as a theatre man. As we have seen, the professor of classical literature not only wrote plays – many of them – but was directly involved in the theatre as an enterprise. It was, however, as an author that he was and remains most famous, not least because he was a literary jack of all trades to a degree rarely seen.

When faced with such a versatility as that outlined above and analysed in the following chapters, the reader is likely to ask whether there is any coherence, any leading thread through all of it, or at least most of it? Indeed, is there any fixed authorial persona behind it? The answer to be suggested here is the paradoxical one that there is an important coherence of sorts when we understand why these questions are misconceived. Let us begin where Holberg himself began.

## Eclectic practices

One of the basic lessons Holberg took from his early acquaintance with the natural law of Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius was a profound dislike of metaphysics, a standpoint that was also temperamental. Although his natural law treatise otherwise follows Pufendorf closely, it is therefore not surprising that he simply ignored the German thinker's theory of the ontological status of morality. As shown in Chapter 3, this theory was an explanation of all 'moral' phenomena (what today would be called culture) as something that is instituted by human activity and superimposed upon the natural world. But although Holberg avoided explicit theorising about the conventional character of morals – which may also have been with a general readership in mind – it was in fact a basic, though inconsistent, presupposition throughout his life, and this shows itself in several ways.



Thus political authority had to be understood as based upon agreement, and *proper* authority as based on *contractual* agreement. In accordance with this, Holberg dutifully and in great detail argued that this was what had happened with the absolutist constitutional coup by the Danish King Frederick III in 1660 (cf. 174–176). Also Holberg's ecclesiology was pure Pufendorf; the church was a human association and therefore subject to political control, a lesson inculcated indirectly by the miserable story of how things went when the church was thought to be a divine institution and was in the hands of clerics with interests separate from those of the secular ruler (Chapter 9). Furthermore, Calvinist and similar rights theories had to be rejected as a mistaken 'naturalism', for rights were – like all moral distinctions – instituted by people (71–74). A similarly Pufendorffian argument was used in Holberg's remarkable plea, or virtual campaign, that women should have equal access to education and careers, including in the state administration and judiciary (Chapters 5–6 *passim*). The argument was that all the significant gender differences in social life were human constructions and hence like all such constructions open to prudential argument, and Holberg's assessment was that the female half of humanity was an under-utilized resource. Needless to say, modern commentators have not resisted the fanciful idea that this was an argument for women's *rights*. Finally, Holberg's basic Pufendorffianism made it a matter of course that he late in life would reject Montesquieu's climatic theory of social phenomena (105–109).

In other words, there is a very basic Pufendorffian framework for Holberg's intellectual universe, but that does not by any means suffice to explain all that goes on inside that universe, nor his significant departures from it. The contemporary culture of philosophical eclecticism gives us the most useful guiding thread through the Holbergian labyrinth, but the eclectic theme has some peculiar variations in Holberg, as we will see. His early study of Pufendorf and Thomasius would immediately have introduced him to the flourishing German eclecticism of the time, which was itself the late phase of a long history.<sup>1</sup> We immediately see this reflected in the presentation of Holberg's natural law work (Chapters 3 and 4). This is prefaced with a brief history of moral thought, i.e. the schools that have to be taken into account in the construction of one's own moral philosophy, and the title page explicitly proclaims its derivation from Grotius, Pufendorf and Thomasius.<sup>2</sup> Inside the work we find that the chapter headings were taken from Pufendorf's *De officio hominis et civis*, while a significant proportion of the text was either directly or indirectly taken from Pufendorf's major work, the *De jure naturae et gentium*. Similarly, in the *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States*, not only the title and the structure but also much of its material were derived from the German's European history (173–174). Similar procedures are to be found in much of the later work; large parts of the *Jewish History* were taken from the huge *Universal History*,<sup>3</sup> and the *Lives of Heroes* and *Lives of Heroines* 'borrow' extensively from a variety of mainly French literature (Chapters 10 and 5).



The Danish histories are much less dependent upon other material, but then there was relatively little recent work of relevance to draw from.<sup>4</sup>

The works that in modern conception were ‘plagiarized’ did not by any means consist *only* of borrowed material. Holberg added significantly. In the historical works he changed to a Danish perspective on controversial (read Swedish) issues, he added Nordic and other material, he re-arranged, he supplied his own jokes, etc. Similarly, in the natural law works he dropped matters in Pufendorf that he found too controversial or too metaphysical, he inserted bits and pieces more or less directly from Grotius and Thomasius; in later editions he did battle with Barbeyrac; and not least, he added a lot of Danish and Norwegian legal material in order to make the work locally useful.

A somewhat different but important strategy in Holberg’s way of composing was to parrot whatever he happened to be reading. Significant parts of his *Moral Reflections* and his *Epistles* that make up his late works in moral philosophy, are so close to his reading that they have the character of précis or reading notes (Chapter 4). For instance, we can follow his reading of Bayle’s *Dictionnaire* section by section; he will take over the references in whatever he is reading, etc. The procedure is somewhat like that of ‘intellectual’ journalism in the culture or science sections of our serious newspapers: the journalist has read a scholarly work or scientific article and gives an account of the topic in brief and more or less popular form. Sometimes Holberg said what he himself thought about the question at issue, sometimes he did not. Just as we would not necessarily expect the journalist to have a consistent line of argument from one article to another, so we find quite a variety of standpoints in Holberg’s essays (Chapter 1). Sometimes Holberg was quite open about his procedure, as in the case of the work on natural law. Sometimes he indicated what he was reading by locutions such as ‘as Le Clerc says’. Sometimes he was so silent that scholars still continue to discover what he was up to (see, for example, chapter 10). But even if in some cases he went to extremes in the extent of his borrowings, the general method was exactly what we would expect in the culture of eclecticism. Other aspects of his work make his case more intriguing.

Several of Holberg’s works were pseudonymous. This had nothing to do with fear of censorship or of the public – often his *de facto* authorship was commonly known and at one stage or another acknowledged by him.<sup>5</sup> No, we have to see the *art* of pseudonymity as integral to much of his work. Thus his substantial body of comedies and his satires were all supposedly written by one ‘Hans Mickelsen’, who was a brewer and citizen in the small provincial town of Kalundborg (a real place), while the brewer’s works were supplied with comments by the learned and equally fictitious ‘Just Justesen’. Similarly, his utopian novel was supposedly a travel account by a young man from Bergen called ‘Niels Klim’ (Chapter 6) What is more, inside such works we encounter all manner of tricks to diffuse the ‘authorship’ of what is being said (Chapter 1). For example,



the satirical poem whose preface often is used as the primary evidence for Holberg's radical idea of gender equality is presented as penned by 'Zille Hans-Daughter', a girl in Ebeltoft (an even smaller provincial town than Kalundborg) sent to the above mentioned brewer 'Hans Mickelsen'. In the second edition of the utopian novel, additions are presented as sworn depositions by relatives of the now deceased 'Klim', testifying to the total veracity of his account of his travels (127–128). In fact, testifying to the importance of truth in historical accounts by means of entirely bogus but mock-learned documentation was standard in Holberg's bag of tricks. In the satirical poem *Peder Paars* we get digressions within digressions and speeches within speeches, confusing the reader's sense of who is maintaining what (Chapter 6) just as the comedies present plays within plays, like a set of Chinese boxes (Chapter 7).<sup>6</sup> What is more, when Holberg in his essays and autobiographical writings reviews the impact of his plays and satires, he will talk about their leading figures, such as 'Peder Paars' and 'Niels Klim', and their fictitious authors and commentators as if they were real people, yet at the same time take it for granted that the reader knows that he, Holberg, is the author of everything.

### Entertainment as epistemic attitude

Under these circumstances, what does it mean to say that Ludvig Holberg – the person who was born in 1684 and died in 1754 – *held* the various opinions that were put forward in such pseudonymous works? What is the standing of these opinions compared with the ones in works published under the name of Holberg – but which in fact were partly written by others whom he borrowed from or followed? These issues become even more interesting, when we see how Holberg questioned the relationship between person and opinion. It was an issue that confronted him already early, when he began to write comedies, for he was well aware of an important controversy in Hamburg about the status of the theatre in which exactly the question of the playwright's (and the actor's) responsibility for the pronouncements of the theatrical characters was debated.<sup>7</sup> Holberg made the question explicit when he later discussed debates about theological doctrine, insisting that one should distinguish between personal beliefs and attitudes and the opinions expressed. This was a well-known argumentative strategy concerning controversial and potentially dangerous subjects, especially within heterodox religion.<sup>8</sup> Here it was associated with 'indifferentism', i.e. the idea that external forms or confessional expressions of religion were indifferent as far as salvation was concerned. This was the context for Holberg's insistence that a minimalist religion also was sufficient for public life. However, the point to be emphasized here is that it was in line with his more general attitude to authorship. On a variety of subjects, he would put forward ideas that he plainly did not agree with or that he did not want to formulate a standpoint on, in the comedies and satires by making fun of them,



in the essays by pointing out their social usefulness. Thus he thought that Pierre Bayle's dangerous ideas were very good tools with which to shake up people's dogmatism (Chapter 4). When Holberg after repeated considerations of the theodicy problem summed up a moderate standpoint in what he called 'my *systema*', he added:

which I certainly don't subscribe to but only state as a *Problema* that with good intention may be put forward by those who think that the issue [the problem of evil] cannot be decided in any other way.<sup>9</sup>

But, he continued, if not even this can be admitted, then it is best just to stop the debate and acknowledge a mystery beyond human understanding. In another context, he disputed the English deist Anthony Collins' assertion of an unqualified duty only to believe on one's own grounds, i.e. on grounds of a free conscience. Not necessarily so, said Holberg. For although we have a duty to examine ideas, including, articles of faith, as best we can, and although the necessary articles are few and simple, there may be people who do not have the wits to do so, and they may safely follow a teacher, especially a publicly authorized teacher, in such matters. Similarly, it is perfectly right to conform to public doctrine, if the alternative is civic disturbance.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the duty to tell the truth is dependent upon social relations: one has a duty to do it if someone has a specific right to know, but one may have a duty not to do it, if it causes harm.<sup>11</sup>

One could give many other examples, but Holberg did provide a very clear general statement of his attitude:

I do not write so much to *dogmatise* as to express certain opinions that have turned up in my thinking, and which should only be considered as *Problemata*, opinions that I present in all modesty in order to hear the explanations of others, especially since I do not trust my own understanding in anything, but, willing to learn, subject myself to the better judgment of others, wishing that everyone would do likewise.<sup>12</sup>

There are other similar statements by Holberg, but none of them are more elaborate than this one. This is in itself of significance. He was not putting forward a theory, certainly nothing that one would call a theory of knowledge. Similarly, he never articulated a theory of eclecticism, in fact, only a few times and more or less *en passant* did he call himself an eclectic.<sup>13</sup> Quite apart from his temperamental dislike of overarching philosophical theories, his standpoint could not sensibly be seen as a theory, for that would itself be a form of 'dogmatising' and laying claim to the truth. His sensitivity to this problem is revealed most interestingly in his critique of scepticism, with which his own standpoint sometimes has been confused.

As was common, Holberg distinguished between the older Academic scepticism, represented by Archesilaos and Carneades, and the younger



Pyrrhonism of Pyrrho himself, Sextus Empiricus and others.<sup>14</sup> As was also common, he considered these two sects in their relationship to the dogmatic sects, such as stoicism, that maintained a particular set of doctrines. Academic scepticism rested on the negative argument that dogma, positive assertions of knowledge, could always be doubted, and it was therefore a useful corrective to dogmatism. At the same time, it clearly fell prey to the criticism by the Pyrrhonians that it was itself a theory, a dogma. Pyrrhonism again was, in Holberg's eyes, a completely negative doctrine, namely the denial that anything could be asserted. This he found utterly ridiculous since it flew in the face of what people actually did in the living of their lives,<sup>15</sup> and with much amusement he marched up the usual practical 'refutations' of such out-and-out scepticism. Humour, satire and driving ad absurdum were the only appropriate means to deal with such madness, whereas it was meaningless to try to refute such scepticism by theoretical arguments, as Aristotle had done. By establishing and rejecting this triangle consisting of the two scepticisms and their dogmatic opposition, Holberg implied his own epistemic position, namely a rejection of that which the classical sects of philosophers – despite all opposition – had in common, namely that knowledge as such is something about which it makes sense to ask for a justification.

Holberg's is not a theory about knowledge that can be put up against other theories that address the question whether and how knowledge can be justified. Rather, his standpoint was an attitude that had to be shown in practice, and in his late essays, which are very often retrospective, he indicated time and again the various ways in which he had practiced. The point is also underlined by his striking suggestion that his moralizing would die with him, and that everyone had to establish his or her own attitude.

What Holberg has shown us in his practice is best seen as an epistemic attitude, one that may be characterized by means of the expression 'to entertain an opinion'. When you entertain an idea, you do not subscribe to it, that is, adopt it as yours to be defended as yours, but nor do you suspend judgment about it in the sense of ceasing to debate it, though Holberg would occasionally do that about some ideas, as we saw in the case of the problem of evil. Rather, when you entertain an idea, you consider it to be a standpoint that is possible, in the sense of being open to continuing debate and further development, something we see in Holberg's practice of carrying over themes and figures between different genres of work. We may call this Holberg's 'entertainment epistemology', for the pun fits exactly his concern to entertain by getting his audience to entertain ideas. As indicated in the passage I just quoted, Holberg was inviting to a social practice in which the participants could experience pleasure, outrage, doubt, encouragement, enlightenment or whatever by entertaining ideas, irrespective of the authorship of these ideas, i.e. irrespective of whether anyone in particular *held* them in the sense of subscribing to them. It belongs wonderfully to the whole scheme of things that Holberg himself would not dream of engaging in communal debate.



His thing was to put on a one-man show that would demonstrate *ad oculos* the practices I indicated above, of floating the identity of authors and of texts, of blurring the fictitiousness of literary figures, etc. Holberg himself expressed the value of his life's 'entertainment' in this way:

With this last piece of writing [i.e., the *Epistles*] I have thus finally fulfilled my resolution to *moralise* in all useful ways, and the reader must judge for himself which method may be said to be the most forceful. The different ways I have made use of to this purpose are merry *Poëmata*, satires, reflections on the exploits of heroes and heroines, serious moral thoughts, fictitious travel accounts, and finally the present *Epistles*. So it remains only to undertake moral issues through conversations, which, however, may be said to have happened through my plays that consist of dialogues and which nearly all are moral.<sup>16</sup>

Holberg obviously does not have a moral *theory*, either in the sense of the classical schools or in the sense of modern normative moral philosophy *à la* Kant or John Stuart Mill. What he means by moralizing is that he has raised or entertained moral subjects together with his readers and theatre audiences, where the word 'moral' has to be taken in the broad Pufendorbian sense, noted above, of what we would call cultural and social. This was what he understood by 'moral philosophy', and it is indicative of his meaning that he insisted on the centrality of his plays to that enterprise, and that he thought of Molière as 'one of the great philosophers of modern times'.<sup>17</sup>

### Moralizer and other personae

With such a conception of moral philosophy it is beside the point to ask for consistency of *doctrine*. Indeed, the law of non-contradiction would seem to epitomise the kind of logic and rationalistic philosophy that Holberg despised, and as a matter of fact, we find him entertaining widely and wildly different lines of argument. Nevertheless, in view of the many different forms of work that he produced, it has to be asked whether he was only the epistemic entertainer in the now defined sense. Was there another Holberg of an intellectually more fixed address, so to speak? We may approach this question by looking again at the passage just quoted, where we saw that he had 'moralized' in a wide variety of genres. What is missing is as striking as what he lists. Neither natural law nor history is mentioned. It is not likely that Holberg simply forgot the two fields of study from which he started his career, one of which, history, was his academic profession and the subject of half of his voluminous publications.

The likely explanation is that natural law and history were subjects that he would have seen as entirely unsuitable for the approach that he took in all the other genres. To be a natural lawyer or a historian were completely different roles to adopt than that of the multi-skilled moralizer. Different offices



required the cultivation of personae with different epistemic attitudes.<sup>18</sup> In the case of natural law, there were certainly overlaps with the moralizing genres, topics such as free will, divine versus natural law, obligation, etc., but on the whole Holberg's early text on natural law went lightly on the purely philosophical issues and aimed at being a useful handbook of basic juridical concepts. As such, the relevant criteria were systematic coherence and relevance to the historically given juridical system and its practitioners. The requirement was, therefore, for an authoritative appearance of the author, which in Holberg's case was provided by the international jurists on whose work he so demonstratively drew. Any attempt to be 'entertaining' by playing around with systematicity or authorial identity would have undermined the whole enterprise, and whatever fun he wanted to have with lawyers, he could have in his plays and essays (and he did).

In the case of history, Holberg assumes yet another distinctive role, although also here there are overlaps with the other genres of work. Thus he certainly thought that history should provide moral lessons, but in general they were so to speak straight-faced examples of virtue and vice. He also wanted his histories to be entertaining, but in the common sense of being informative about people and events, of containing exciting tales, and, not least, of being funny and ironic (166–169). What is more, inside the historical works he would here and there play some of his identity tricks. For example, in the *General History of the Church*, he stresses that in the early part where he accounts for the life of Jesus and the disciples, he adopts the serious style appropriate to the moral standing of the subjects, but in tune with his story of the decay of the institutionalized church, he adopts very different styles of writing, especially the satirical (Chapter 9). But also this is straightforward in comparison with the satires, comedies and multifarious essays.

In Chapter 8, Holberg is characterized as a gentleman historian whose genre of history is best understood as pragmatic.<sup>19</sup> He was not a royal historiographer, nor did he write as a professor of history (with the exception of a school textbook in universal history). He was not in any meaningful sense a citizen of any European republic of letters, rather, he was writing in Danish to cultivate an emerging polite reading public in his own country and he was doing so as an independent, more or less self-made member of that public (chapter 1). The history he wrote was therefore neither learned in an antiquarian sense, nor didactic and rhetorical in either a classical or Renaissance mode. It aimed to be straightforwardly instructive narrative about the course of events that had brought about the (nearly) contemporary Danish-Norwegian society. In doing so, it suggested that this society on the whole was as good as the vicissitudes of history would allow. Holberg thus cultivated a role as historian whose independence supported an impartiality that allowed him to instruct his readers about the benefits of being subjects of the current regime in state and church.

In addition to the short-lived natural lawyer and the long-lived historian, it is useful to distinguish another persona that Holberg kept distinct



from his moralizing ‘entertainer’, that of the religionist. This is a rather slim character, but it is one that is a presence in his work for the whole of his career and whose office is commonly made distinctive through its contrast with that of the ‘entertainer’ (Chapter 4). It begins in his natural law work by the unargued recognition of God’s revealed law as a norm on a par with God’s natural law. Over the years, his eclecticism is applied to large parts of the traditional conception of the Christian religion, and in the *Moral Reflections* he declares that although he himself would not defend a ‘Theologia eclectica’, he would not be against it if somebody else did.<sup>20</sup> This is a typical example of how Holberg created distance to the ideas that he floated. After introducing a line of argument, he washes his hands of the defence of it. On top of that, he implies an ignorance that it is hard to take seriously, for eclectic theology was a well-known topic in the German literature that he was conversant with, and was tied up with the reception of his own favourite author, Grotius.<sup>21</sup> But irrespective of his eclectic games, there always remained a hard core of simple religious doctrine that was outside of even his wide idea of adiaphora – outside the reach of time and circumstance and hence not available to be merely entertained but had to be believed. The lived faith of Christ and his earliest followers was the universally valid morality of nature; it could be formulated in a simple catechism; it was prior to all moral theology and should be the first object of instruction.<sup>22</sup>

### Holberg – himself?

How are we to understand the relationship between these quite different authorial personae, that of the natural lawyer, that of the pragmatic gentleman historian, that of the minimalist religionist and that of the eclectic moralizing ‘entertainer’? It would obviously be a mistake to think that there was a theoretical conception, let alone a plan, behind these types. That would presuppose an over-arching universal rationality either of the sort that Holberg repudiated in its scholastic and more recent forms, or of the sort that brought his kind of Enlightenment to a close late in the century and which subsequently has been misapplied to him by much scholarship. Rather, the personae I have outlined identify different practices that Holberg as a matter of fact engaged in, and, as already indicated, they were often interwoven on particular points. This interweaving must also be given a temporal perspective. Different forms of work certainly dominated at different times of Holberg’s life; at the same time the overlaps are very significant, for they show his ability and concern to maintain his pluralism. However, it is useful to point to the emergence of the essayist in the 1740s (38–42) as a turning point, not only and perhaps not so much because of the self-conscious specification of the role as public moralizer as because Holberg here sought out ways of signalling, without theorizing, his eclecticism and its relationship to the other personae and their offices that he had been practicing in his authorship.



## 22 Introduction

It is typical that Holberg articulated his basic outlook in theatrical terms, and equally typical of his intellectual style that the occasion was a particular event, namely a defence of masquerades (which eventually were prohibited in Copenhagen). Indeed, Holberg wrote a comedy called *Mascarade* that 170 years later became the basis for Carl Nielsen's opera of that name. The masquerade is a particularly clever institution, according to Holberg:

It is an imitation of the ancient saturnalia that at certain times of the year were held in order to recreate the natural state, when there were no differences between high and low, between masters and servants, between people and *characterized* people.<sup>23</sup> It is to this end that people at carnival times mask themselves, so that social intercourse can be free, unconstrained, without fear and embarrassment, so that a subject may become acquainted with his king and a servant with his master, which cannot but be pleasant for both high and low . . .

[Masquerades are in fact] a philosophical game, or at least . . . they lead to philosophical considerations . . . One may say . . . that the usual condition in which we live is a constant masquerade, since government, fashions and customs impose masks upon us, which we sort of take off during such games, and that actually we are not really masked except when we go with our face bared.<sup>24</sup>

Holberg played this philosophical game with extraordinary versatility, as we have now seen. In order to get a wider perspective on his performance it is once again useful to remind ourselves that in some ways he had been shaped by Pufendorf. It is difficult not to see Holberg as imbued from the very beginning with Pufendorf's idea of the social world as a network of overlapping *officia*, according to which one and the same individual may be, say, a spouse, a property owner, a soldier, a citizen, etc. (cf. 66–68). In the same way, we find Holberg discharging the different authorial offices we have indicated (and arguably others as well), sometimes letting them encroach on each other, yet keeping them distinct.

However, the persona he most consistently presented to the public was himself, Ludvig Holberg, as the 'real' person who could fill all the other roles. He did so in his four *Autobiographical Letters* (cf. chapter 2) and in many passages in other works where he reflected upon his relationship to his various authorial roles. For example, he pointed out that while the author of several forms of his writings was cheerful, he himself was anything but. Holberg's supposedly real self is presented in rich detail. Among his most important values are moderation and self-knowledge, themes that are pervasive in the work. This may sound like an over-arching moral theory above all the disparate forms of moralizing, and perhaps it was. But it is not obvious how it could be so, for it amounts to less than has commonly been supposed. True, Holberg suggests that 'all virtue consists in moderation',



but it turns out that moderation simply means the avoidance of extremes, not the settlement of what is morally right or good. For the individual it is a matter of utility, for by keeping the passions in check he or she will better be able to pursue whatever he or she wants to do; and it is the same in society, which has to avoid the extremes of revolutionary change or stagnation. In other words, this is only in the thinnest possible sense a stoic virtue ethics. As for Holberg's favourite maxim, 'know thyself', this was not meant as inculcation to grasp some transcendent autonomous I or as a spur to self-realization. In his handling, the maxim was encouragement to be clear-headed about your practical possibilities in life, such as securing peace or being successful in love. Holberg's Seneca and Socrates had the demeanour of matter-of-fact common sense, little more. This is not to suggest that Holberg's assertion of the value of self-knowledge and moderation was either trivial or insincere. It was an important element in his cultivation of the trust of his audience. He had to keep persuading readers, theatre goers and society in general that behind the amorphous body of publications there was a sensible person with serious intentions of educating the public by all those means – by 'himself' being the guarantor of all the other authorial persons. But even that is not as straight-forward as might be expected, for the *Autobiographical Letters* repeatedly makes their truthfulness an issue by being demonstratively asserted (Chapter 2). In fact, these assurances that the real truth is being told are not unlike those applied in the obvious fiction of *Niels Klim*. What is more, the first of the *Letters* is presented as published without Holberg's knowledge by the person to whom it was sent. And all the *Letters* pretend to be private personal communications to a friend, who, however, is both anonymous and fictitious.

In an early comedy the servant remarks when the son in the house proclaims his self-knowledge, 'that's a whole crowd, to know yourself'.<sup>25</sup> Whether or in what sense Holberg managed to know himself behind the whole crowd that he set into the world is an idle question. But he was remarkably successful in persuading his audience, not only in his time but to this day, that in being Holberg, he was genuine and in control of the rest of the 'whole crowd'. Holberg created not only the fictive audience – the addressees – for his hundreds of epistolary essays and supposed autobiographies, but in a very real sense his audience for all that he was and did. Few authors have managed to be accepted as virtually the sole authoritative source about themselves to the extent that Holberg has. In this he has undoubtedly been assisted by the circumstance that most correspondence and many other relevant sources have been lost, but the main reason is that he staged himself more effectively than any of his other figures: as the great loner who virtually single-handedly lifted Danish learning and literature out of lingering scholastic obscurantism and provincial mediocrity, shaped the vernacular for polite literature and introduced European ideas to the locals.

This self-presentation has largely been accepted by the national traditions of interpretation, even as these have shifted with intellectual and



cultural fads and fashions. In recent times, the most persistent tendency has been to see Holberg as an Enlightenment thinker, and since the concept of Enlightenment at the same time has acquired a wide variety of meanings, it has not been difficult to find one to suit individual tastes. While this concern may be important for those wanting confirmation of their modern, supposedly universal Enlightenment values, from an historical point of view it is not clear what is gained by characterizing Holberg as an Enlightenment figure. The term has been laden with so many modern connotations that it is an obstacle to the sheer plurality and complexity of Holberg's mode of operating, which is the subject of this book. What is more, if the Enlightenment tag were to be of any help in our view of Holberg, other than to place him in time as we do in the title of this book, we would need a proper understanding of the intellectual rivals whom he so successfully upstaged by saying that he had done so and being believed. But that is beyond our volume.

## Notes

- 1 The main work on eclecticism as a whole is Michael Albrecht, *Eklektik. Eine Begriffsgeschichte mit Hinweisen auf die Philosophie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: 1994). Eclecticism is central to Martin Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund. Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland 1680–1720* (Hamburg: 2002; = *Enlightenment Underground. Radical Germany 1680–1720*, trans. E. C. E. Midelfort (Charlottesville, VA: 2016), and to his *Prekäres Wissen. Eine andere Ideengeschichte der frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: 2012.) The importance of eclecticism for early-modern natural law was suggested by Richard Tuck, 'The 'modern' theory of natural law', in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, ed. A. Pagden, (Cambridge: 1987), 99–119. Cf. 84–87.
- 2 The importance of the histories of moral thought as a genre derived from eclecticism is established in T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: 2000).
- 3 Anon. [George Sale, George Psalmanazar et al.], *An Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time to the Present: Compiled from Original Authors*. Vol I. 2. ed. (London: 1740).
- 4 Bibliographical details for the works mentioned here are given in the Bibliographies.
- 5 This is not to say that Holberg was not concerned with the threat of censorship for other reasons; see chapter 1 below.
- 6 To add to the multiplicity of tongues, Holberg is fond of entirely invented languages, cf. 203.
- 7 See 139, and Hermann Rückleben, *Die Niederwerfung der hamburgischen Ratsgewalt. Kirchliche Bewegungen und bürgerliche Unruhen im ausgehenden 17. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: 1970), 50ff.
- 8 Cf. Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund*, 432ff.
- 9 *Epistler* IV, 83.
- 10 *Epistler* IV, 224–228.
- 11 *Epistler* IV, 192–193
- 12 *Epistler* I, 285–286.
- 13 *Epistler* III, 473, IV, 216, and *Adskillige Store Heltes og Berømmelige Mænds . . . Historier*, II, 464–465



- 14 The following sketch of Holberg's view of scepticism is based upon epistles No. 30, 36, 333 and 367, i.e. *Epistler* I, 163–168, 198–200, 219–225, and IV, 116–117 and 243–247.
- 15 He also found it dangerous to religion, for he saw what he took to be La Mothe le Vayer's, Pierre-Daniel Huet's and Pierre Bayle's fideism based on scepticism as a form of 'fanaticism' (which often was taken to include also pietism).
- 16 *Epistler* I, 3r–3v. Cf. 31–33.
- 17 *Moralske Tanker*, 18.
- 18 Cf. *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe. The Nature of a Contested Identity*, ed. C. Condren, S. Gaukroger, I. Hunter, Cambridge: 2006; I. Hunter, 'The history of philosophy and the persona of the philosopher', *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007): 571–600. For a further discussion of the persona concept and Holberg's consideration of genres, see Chapter 1.
- 19 Cf. Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker. En historiografisk-kritisk undersøgelse* (Copenhagen: 2015).
- 20 *Moralske Tanker*, 56.
- 21 Albrecht, *Eklektik*, 427–433, 509–525.
- 22 *Epistler* II, 214, and I, 246–255.
- 23 The Danish word here translated as 'people' for the sake of readability is 'mennesker', 'human beings'.
- 24 *Epistler* IV, 162–163. The use of the masquerade and the mask metaphors in exactly this way was part and parcel of the eclectic culture; see Mulsow, *Prekäres Wissen*, 71–72.
- 25 *Jean de France*, III.2. In *Hans Mickelsens Comoedier* I, K2v.





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# Part I

# Lives





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# 1 Holberg's authorial personae

*Thomas Ewen Daltveit Slettebø*

The aim of this chapter is to discuss Ludvig Holberg's authorial personae, the images of himself-as-author that Holberg projected in his writings. *Persona* is the Latin word for mask, and in modern English it is often used to refer to a social role or a character. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *persona* both as 'the aspect of someone's character that is presented to or perceived by others' and as 'a role or character adopted by an author or an actor.'<sup>1</sup> The first implies the existence of an authentic character, aspects of which can be displayed to and perceived by others. The second definition implies that a *persona* is something one can adopt, or cast off, at will. Both of these definitions are relevant here, but neither exhausts the possible meanings of the term.

The intention here is to make use of the concept of *persona* as it has been elaborated by historians of philosophy and science in recent years.<sup>2</sup> The concept of *persona* has been used to describe how specific modes of selfhood are cultivated in various historical circumstances, defining it as 'a cultural identity that simultaneously shapes the individual in body and mind and creates a collective with a shared and recognizable physiognomy'.<sup>3</sup> It has been emphasized that *personae* should not be understood as the individual's 'momentary instances of self-fashioning', but rather the culturally recognizable, although often contested, templates and repertoires available to the individual. *Personae* are 'ideal-typical models' that 'have to be applied, developed, and refined in every individual situation.'<sup>4</sup>

This concept of *persona* is a rewarding way to approach Ludvig Holberg's self-presentations as an author. Our primary interest here shall be Holberg's appropriation of *authorial personae*. More specifically, we will see the ways in which Holberg described and categorized his own literary production in terms of the culturally defined *personae* available to him as an author in Denmark-Norway in the first half of the eighteenth century. I shall argue that Holberg's approach to this matter was in large part determined by the public reactions to his writings, as well as the boundaries set by political and institutional factors such as censorship and anti-libel legislation in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway. As we shall see, the aging Holberg was concerned with defending himself and his



writings against what he claimed to be illegitimate accusations and with demonstrating his social responsibility and respectability. Much of this rhetoric can be understood as Holberg's way of explaining and defending his activities as an author in terms of an office.<sup>5</sup> In the last fifteen years of his life, starting in the early 1740s, Holberg looked back on his career and described himself as a *moralist*, whose (almost) entire oeuvre had been part of the same project, to enlighten his countrymen about true virtue and vice. This is, I would argue, the mature Holberg's way of incorporating the most controversial parts of his production, the satirical writings of the 1720s, into the overarching persona of the moralist. As we shall see, Holberg did not include his work on natural law and his national histories in this elaborate self-staging. These works were written in the context of Holberg's professional career as a university professor and Holberg himself described them as the 'honourable' part of his production. Importantly, both of these offices, that of the natural law philosopher and the historian, could be construed as having clearly demarcated and highly useful functions in the commonwealth; the natural law philosopher educated the young about moral precepts and their natural causes, thus contributing to 'the edification and maintenance of human society.'<sup>6</sup> The historian taught morals by example, and contributed to enhancing the glory of the fatherland by throwing light on the history of its illustrious monarchs. Consequently, there was no need for mounting an elaborate defence of these texts. The persona of the satirist, however, was much more problematic in the context of the Danish-Norwegian absolute monarchy. The question here is how Holberg solved this dilemma. The answer is his cultivation of the persona of the moralist, defined as an office with concomitant duties and responsibilities.

The main sources will be the prefaces to Ludvig Holberg's works from the entire span of his career as a writer, starting with the *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States* (1711) and ending with the posthumously published last volume of his *Epistles* (1754). However, I shall primarily focus on the latter half of Holberg's oeuvre, since the preface to his *General Church History* (1738) is the first occasion where he starts to look back and reflect on his literary production as a whole, a tendency that continues in the prefaces to *Moral Reflections* (1744), *Lives of Heroines* (1745) and the first volume of *Epistles* (1748).

### *I have moralized in various ways*

The *General Church History*, Holberg's third major work of history published within a period of ten years, surveyed the history of the church from Jesus Christ to Luther's Reformation.<sup>7</sup> In the preface, Holberg touched upon the question of why he had treated different periods of the history of the church in different styles, and argued that he had 'accommodated [his] pen to the matter, which [he had] tried to do also in all [his] other writings.'<sup>8</sup>



Holberg's remarks on the stylistic variations in the *General Church History* led him on to a discussion of his entire literary production and, more specifically, the relationship between the works and his own person. He claimed that many people had formed a false impression of him by imagining that, since he had written so many humorous works, it was against his nature to write about serious matters. Nothing could be further from the truth, Holberg claimed. He was in fact an austere and serious man who had only written humorous works because Denmark had hitherto lacked such writings and because others had encouraged him to write them. He used the metaphor of a mask to explain how his pen was dictated by considerations of genre:

To that purpose, I have often needed to cast off my honourable mask in order to succeed in humorous moral writings, and put it on again when dealing with matters that require an austere and honourable style. As the saying goes: Hic Rhodus hic salta.<sup>9</sup>

As proof that it was a mistake to judge an author's nature from his writings, Holberg cited the example of Socrates, who had chosen humorous dialogues as his method of moralizing. This did not mean that the philosopher himself was a cheerful and lively man; if he had found another, more effective, way to moralize, his moral philosophy would have become as austere as Seneca's. 'One sees from this', Holberg concluded, 'that a writer must adopt several guises and that, therefore, not every work is a mirror of one's inclination.'<sup>10</sup> In other words, Holberg's works should be considered in terms of different personae: his humorous writings were not the product of an inherently humorous mind, but of a literary man and a moral educator. The same claim would reappear with more force six years later, as Holberg made yet another summary of his career.

*Moral Reflections* (1744) has been described as the first and most successful work of what has been referred to as Holberg's 'philosophical raptus.'<sup>11</sup> The book is a collection of moral philosophical essays on topics ranging from the great questions in life (religion and virtue) to the more prosaic (fashion and hypochondria). In the preface to the reader, Holberg signalled that the work represented a turning point in his production. He wrote that he would now direct his studies towards moral meditations and theology, since his age and ailing health made him consider himself a 'man ready to depart, who must write his system before he says farewell and starts his journey.'<sup>12</sup> What shall primarily concern us here is the introduction to the work, where Holberg presented a short history of moral philosophical genres.

He started with asserting that, next to theology, no science is more useful than 'morals.'<sup>13</sup> Holberg uses the word 'Morale', which may mean moral principle or lesson, but here is roughly synonymous with moral philosophy. He then made a first division between serious and humorous moral



writings. Works of the former sort explained virtues and vices in an honourable and proper style. Since such texts were more useful and edifying than pleasant, wrote Holberg, philosophers had tried various methods to awaken the attention and interest of the readers. He enumerated a number of genres and the philosophers and authors who had used them: Fables (Aesop, Jesus), dialogues (Socrates), novels (Fénelon, Richardson) fictional travel descriptions (Swift, Bidermann), fictional letters (Montesquieu) and Spectator-journals. Humorous moral writings, on the other hand, consisted of satires and comedies. After a short review of ancient and modern satirists (Horace, Juvenal, Boileau), Holberg claimed that comedy was the most powerful genre in which a writer could moralize and praised Molière as one of ‘the greatest philosophers of recent times.’<sup>14</sup> The moral writings that had the best effect were the most useful, claimed Holberg, and he doubted whether the precepts of the best and greatest philosophers had more success in attacking human weaknesses than Molière’s plays, even though they seemed to have been written merely for diversion.

After thus describing his predecessors in the business of moralizing, Holberg took stock of his own career. He claimed that the readers could see from his own writings that he had ‘sought to moralize in various ways,’ and listed his own works:

In my *Lives of Heroes* [. . .] there is an honourable and serious *morale*. In my *satires* there is salt and pepper and everything that stings, but also heals. My *comedies* contain jest, or the truths that are pursued through laughter. My *Latin epigrams* and *Subterranean Journey* [*Niels Klim*] are full of *moral paradoxes*, since I have sought in those writings to dispute commonly held errors, and to *distinguish* the *reality* of virtues and vices from their *appearance*.<sup>15</sup>

For the first time, Holberg subsumed most of his multifaceted production under the same overarching category. The list is almost exhaustive, but we recognize that Holberg did not include any of his histories in the enumeration of his moral writings. The genre of history was also absent from a similar list that Holberg wrote four years later.<sup>16</sup> The exception seems somewhat surprising, since history was considered by contemporaries to be eminently suitable for teaching morals by example.<sup>17</sup> Holberg himself emphasized this function in his ‘Deliberation on Histories’, where he declared that the purpose of good histories is to ‘teach and be a mirror in which one can see and judge the future from past events, learn to know oneself and others, and acquire the most solid knowledge about morals, public law and matters of state.’<sup>18</sup> The reason for the absence of the genre of history in this company is best explained by the fundamental respectability of the historical genre. As we shall see later, satire was a problematic genre in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway. And although Holberg was highly respected by contemporaries for his comedies, the theatre was not acceptable in all quarters (cf.



chapter 7). In contrast, associations with immorality or social irresponsibility did not taint the art of history in any way. Holberg's histories, as well as the book on natural law, were parts of the respectable and serious side of his career. It was these works that had helped him acquire a professorship at the University of Copenhagen and they were the only largely uncontroversial part of his production.

### Holberg the honourable historian

We do in fact find a self-staging rhetoric of office in the prefaces to Holberg's national histories, but it has a completely different function than in the prefaces I have cited so far. Most notably, the histories and the *Law of Nature and Nations* are the only works that Holberg ever dedicated to the monarch. Both the *Law of Nature* and every historical work, from *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States* (1711) to the first volume of the *History of Denmark* (1732) contain a dedication to Frederick IV or Christian VI. In these texts, Holberg writes in a highly conventional vocabulary of humble devotion and royal service. Holberg's first two works of history were dedicated to the eleven-year-old crown prince Christian. In the dedications, Holberg cast the histories as 'mirrors for princes' meant to educate the young prince by the example of his noble forebears on the Danish throne. In doing so, Holberg followed the example of the Danish nobleman and historian Arild Huitfeldt's (1546–1609) renowned *Chronicles*, which were all dedicated to the young king Christian IV. In the dedication to king Frederick IV in *Law of Nature*, Holberg thanked the king for having promoted him to Professor at the University and referred to the histories he had written for instruction of the crown prince as the reason for his promotion. The royal grace that had been shown him increased Holberg's 'natural desire' to serve the University by continuing to publish works in the historical genre:

[. . .]to that end, I shall give new proofs [of my desire to serve the University], if not every year then at least every second year, particularly in the form of histories, to which the great and glorious victories that God has given your Royal Majesty more than your ancestors, could give me, as well as others, extensive material.<sup>19</sup>

Holberg's promise to publish new histories at least every second year, and the specific reference to the victories of the present king Frederick IV, suggests that Holberg may have nourished a hope of being considered for the official post of historiographer royal.<sup>20</sup> In any case, the dedications to the monarch in Holberg's first three published works read like a model narrative of royal service. A young and ambitious man writes two introductions to European history to instruct the crown prince, and is rewarded with a professorship at the University. As it turned out, it took Holberg thirteen



years to follow up on his promise to publish more historical works. In the meantime, he published a rush of satirical poems and comedies in what he referred to as his ‘poetical raptus.’ None of these works, however, were dedicated to the monarch. Holberg explained the reasons for this in his dedication to Frederick IV in *Description of Denmark and Norway* (1729):

For almost twenty years, I have continued to write various types of books, both humorous and serious. Only those that are historical and juridical have I dedicated to Your Royal Majesty, since they alone contain those things, the reading of which is recommended to rulers. Other writings on inferior matters, on the other hand, I have let run across town and into the country, but not dared to present at the door of a great king.<sup>21</sup>

At this point in his career, Holberg thus divided his literary output in two halves; the histories and the *Law of Nature* belonged to the serious part of his authorship, while the rest belonged to the humorous part. The former works were intimately connected to Holberg’s formal, academic career and had been humbly presented at the feet of the monarch. This does not mean that Holberg distanced himself from the latter; in a comment on the closing of the theatres in his *First Autobiographical Letter* (1728), Holberg expressed pride in his achievements as a dramatist and described his plays as useful and honourable for the kingdom of Denmark.<sup>22</sup> When he wrote of his satirical works in the same book he emphatically stated that he was ‘not ashamed of a work that I consider to be worthy of a philosopher.’ The following discussion, however, reveals that the satirical works had not been entirely unproblematic for Holberg. He alluded to criticism that had been levelled against him, and claimed that he had answered the criticism in his ‘apologetic prefaces.’ He also justified himself by pointing out that honourable men had encouraged him to publish his verses, satires and comedies. Finally, he referred to ‘the many pasquills’ that had been written anonymously and distributed across town and swore that he had had nothing to do with them, although many people had attributed them to him.<sup>23</sup>

### **Holberg, the responsible satirist**

The ‘humorous’ part of Holberg’s career started in a fit of anger. In a history of Denmark, *Kurzgefaßte Dännemärkische Geschichte* (1718), the young jurist and historian Andreas Hojer managed to insult Holberg by suggesting that his *Introduction* followed Samuel von Pufendorf’s *Einleitung* rather closely. Holberg was furious and replied with a satirical dissertation that lambasted the rival. He followed this up with an equally vitriolic dissertation that ridiculed Hojer’s dissertation on forbidden marriages.<sup>24</sup> Holberg’s controversial career as a satirist continued in 1719, when he painted a less than flattering portrait of the island of Anholt in the first book of his



mock-epic poem *Peder Paars*. As explained in chapter 6 below, this led to a serious dispute because the owner of the island, the nobleman and official Frederik Rostgaard, was insulted on his own behalf and on behalf of the people of Anholt. Rostgaard claimed that the work was a violation of paragraph 2–21–4 of the Danish Law, which strictly forbade books that encouraged rebellion or criticized the monarch, and he demanded that the book be confiscated and burnt by the executioner.

In his complaint to the king, Rostgaard also branded the work as a 'disgraceful pasquil' and claimed that its anonymous writer 'deserves to be named a pasquillant.'<sup>25</sup> This accusation had potentially very serious consequences, and Holberg was fortunate that King Frederick IV chose not to act on the complaint.<sup>26</sup> Several paragraphs in the Danish Law could be brought to bear on the pasquillant. Paragraph 6–21–7 stipulated that those who either orally or in writing spread disgraceful lies about the authorities or other honest men or women were to be punished with a fine or, if penniless, with corporeal punishments. Even more relevant was paragraph 6–21–8, which stipulated that anonymous writers or propagators of pasquills attacking honourable people were to lose their honour and work in chains for the rest of their lives or, if the pasquill attacked the authorities, be sentenced to death. In addition to protecting their own royal dignity and majesty, the absolute monarchs thus defined it as their duty to protect the honour of their subjects. Rostgaard appealed to this duty when he wrote that the inhabitants of Anholt expected 'that protection, which your Majesty's most merciful law promises each of his faithful subjects, even the poorest and smallest of them, namely, that [. . .] his honour shall be protected, as long as he does what is appropriate to an honest man.'<sup>27</sup>

A central problem for early modern satirists was the diffuse boundaries between the general satire, which was ostensibly aimed at the errors of humanity and therefore held to be useful to society, and pasquills, which were aimed at lampooning specific persons and therefore not permissible. This was a central issue in discussions on the legitimacy of satire, and almost all contemporary descriptions of satire had a negative reference to pasquills.<sup>28</sup> The problem was that the difference between satires and pasquills was not so sharp as the juridical discourse would suggest.

Furthermore, even if one accepted the difference between satire and pasquill, this did not necessarily mean that one accepted the social benefits of satire. The Lutheran theologian Johann Georg Walch devoted an article in his philosophical encyclopaedia to an examination of the morality of satire, citing, first, Christian Thomasius' claim that satires only created enemies and did not improve the reader, secondly and at length the philosopher August Friedrich Müller, who was in favour of satire. According to Müller, satires were to a certain extent a necessary way of correcting error, vice and godlessness. Serious disputations and thorough demonstrations were only effective among wise men, while ridicule and laughter were more effective among ordinary people. These arguments resemble Holberg's defense



of satire. Walch himself, however, concluded that most of the arguments in favour of satire were too weak. The costs outweighed any potential benefit of satire, and reason must declare that 'es viel besser sey wenn man sich dergleichen Schreib-Art enthält.'<sup>29</sup>

The controversy surrounding the publication of the first book of *Peder Paars* made a strong impression on Holberg and led to a change of course that lasted for the rest of his career as an author. First, Holberg no longer wrote satires that could be perceived as attacks on specific persons or conditions. Second, his satirical writings were increasingly accompanied by meta-reflections on satire. As a consequence, the 'satire is muted, the satire is discussed, the satire disappears. The thing that disappears is more specifically the fresh and fearless critique of society, the satire deals less with issues, more with itself.'<sup>30</sup> Holberg himself admitted at one point that he had removed the sting from his satire to avoid offending anyone.<sup>31</sup>

The defence of satire in general, and his own satires in particular, is a recurring motive in Holberg's works from the early 1720s. Although written in various genres and styles, these reflections are fairly consistent. The serial publication of *Peder Paars* allowed Holberg to comment on the reactions to the earlier books in the third edition. Here, Holberg's learned alter ego Just Justesen defended his other alter ego Hans Mickelsen, the alleged writer of *Peders Paars*, against accusations that his 'innocent poem' was 'deplorable.' According to Justesen/Holberg, *Peder Paars* was more innocent than the works of both the ancient satirists and most of their modern counterparts; whereas these other satirists criticized people by their real names, Hans Mickelsen criticized fictional people in a remote past. The accusations levelled against Mickelsen/Holberg were that he had attacked the University of Copenhagen, Danish judges, the Danish clergy, and the inhabitants of Anholt. Justesen/Holberg countered them one by one and claimed that the author of *Peder Paars* had taken great care not to overstep the boundaries and that he had never spoken of 'religion or the state and any person in particular.'<sup>32</sup>

We find another example in the preface to the *Four Satirical Poems* (1722), 'Just Justesen's deliberation on satirical writings' where Just Justesen again made a case for the legitimacy and effectiveness of satire as a way of correcting vice in society. The poem 'Critique of Peder Paars' in the same volume is an apology for satire in the form of a dialogue between Holberg's alter ego Hans Mickelsen and his brother-in-law Tøger, closely modelled after a similar apology in Horace (*Satires* II,1).<sup>33</sup> The verse satire not only ridiculed *Peder Paars'* detractors as pedants and fools, it also allowed Holberg to present his satire in a good light. Near the end of the poem, Hans Mickelsen describes his project as a satirist:

I write not only to moralize/ not only to polish people but also the  
language/ my pen is innocent, it writes to laugh/ I often mention an A,  
I often paint a B/ I sometimes make up names and often people/ but



shoot wildly without aiming at anyone in particular,/ I never make war on faith and authorities/ but rather on him who makes himself a critic of the state.<sup>34</sup>

The apologetics continued in the preface to *Metamorphosis*, where Hans Mickelsen insisted that his satires did not attack specific persons and were so general that 'a European can be as little offended as a Chinaman. Since those things that are ridiculed can be found in all countries, and have existed in all centuries.'<sup>35</sup> Finally, Holberg discussed the legitimacy of satire in one of the essays in *Moral Reflections* (I, 160). There, he contrasted the panegyrist with the satirist: whereas the former appeared to be a friend of humanity but was in reality its enemy, the satirist appeared to be an enemy of humanity but was in fact its friend.<sup>36</sup> Near the end of the essay, Holberg gave a representative summary of his reflections on satire from the first apologetic prefaces in the 1720s onwards:

From this we see that all satire that is directed against particular persons is worthy of punishment; it is an indecency from any human being but particularly from a philosopher. A general satire, on the other hand, is not only permissible but even useful. Since it aims at vices rather than persons, it corrects without hurting. But, since satires are often misused, the word has become odious.<sup>37</sup>

It has been argued that both the logic and moral arguments in this defence of satire are flawed and that the essay on satire should be seen as satirical in itself.<sup>38</sup> However, these arguments are entirely consistent throughout Holberg's writings on satire; even when he used his pseudonyms and wrote in a jocular tone, he made essentially the same distinction between acceptable general satire and unacceptable satire (= pasquills). More importantly, he had a personal interest in arguing that certain forms of satire, his own among them, should be considered beneficial and harmless.

Although they are in many ways highly conventional, Holberg's apologies for satire seem neither banal nor redundant – there was no consensus among the learned in the early eighteenth century on the legitimacy of satire, and Holberg's claim that certain forms of it were morally sound and beneficial to society was clearly not accepted by everyone. The problem was compounded for Holberg by the fact that his earliest satires had been controversial precisely because they were perceived as having been aimed at specific persons and institutions rather than humanity in general. Holberg dealt with this inconsistency in his *First Autobiographical Letter* (cf. chapter 2), where he actually admitted that some of his satirical verses deserved to be criticized for their spiteful tone. He described anger as a personal weakness, and expressed his regret at having let it get the better of him. He would like a new edition of his poems so that he could remove the many insults they contained. These had slipped in against his will, but he now



recognized that they had left ‘some ugly scars in [his] writings.’<sup>39</sup> In the *Third Autobiographical Letter* from 1743, he reiterated the regret as part of an apology for the satirical form, referring to the example of Socrates and repeating the point about permissible satires and impermissible pasquills. He had:

often, in the prefaces to [his] writings, condemned [himself] for being a little too violent when defending [himself] against accusations from certain quarters – even though this is permissible by the law of war and usually is justified by the right of self-defence.<sup>40</sup>

### To moralize is an office

A year after the publication of *Moral Reflections*, Holberg published *Lives of Heroines* (1745), his second book of Plutarchian parallel biographies. Holberg dedicated much of the preface to disproving rumours that he had had anything to do with a spate of recently published Danish periodicals that bore names such as *Spectator*, *Antispectator* and *The Philosophical Spectator*.<sup>41</sup> The mid-1740s had in fact seen a small rush of such publications in Denmark-Norway, periodicals with a moralizing perspective inspired by Addison and Steele’s original *Spectator* or their many imitators.<sup>42</sup> The first of these journals, *Den danske Spectator* (*The Danish Spectator*), was written anonymously by the twenty-seven-year-old theological student, Jørgen Riis. The *Danish Spectator* was a moralizing journal, the purpose of which was to criticize and satirize, and thereby correct and improve, the many vices that allegedly ran rampant in Denmark.<sup>43</sup> Riis followed up his *Danish Spectator* with the anonymously published *Anti-Spectator*, a smaller journal in verse that criticized the contents of each issue of Riis’ main publication. After a while, the *Danish Spectator* received real criticism with the appearance of the student Andreas Lundhof’s *The Danish Spectator’s Philosophical Spectator*. When Riis replied by ridiculing Lundhof in the *Anti-Spectator*, a third man entered the scene to defend Lundhof. Jacob Graah wrote a series of polemical poems in a learned journal where he dismissed the *Anti-Spectator* as gibberish and criticized Riis for attacking Lundhof in person, rather than human vice in general. Scandal ensued when the *Anti-Spectator* launched an attack on the completely innocent Thomas Clitau, who responded by suing Riis. The courts dismissed the case, and Clitau had to pay a fine.<sup>44</sup> This debacle was the immediate context, present in the minds of Holberg and his fellow citizens of Copenhagen, when *Lives of Heroines* was published.

Holberg did not want to be associated with any of these new journals and criticized them for being immature and unsophisticated works:

since moral science is so noble and important, I would like it to be handled with as much care and propriety as possible. I could wish that no



one except those of age and experience had anything to do with it. *To moralize is an office* wherein one teaches the human race its duties and demonstrates its faults. This requires discernment, age and experience, which means that it is not a job for everyone and not appropriate for everyone. [My emphasis]<sup>45</sup>

Holberg was adamant that he did not wish to discourage young men from publishing their writings. Nothing would be dearer to him, he claimed, than if someone wrote something that pleased the public more than his own writings. However, as the first person who had 'started writing moral books in Danish' and who had done it for forty years, it was imperative to him that the study of morals was 'still handled according to its dignity.'<sup>46</sup> The boom of Danish Spectator periodicals that had flooded the market in recent years had not been for the public good. Their ostensible aim had been to cleanse the land of errors and vices, but the conflicts and even litigations they had caused proved that this had not been their true purpose. Holberg claimed that he was glad that his example had inspired activity in young students, but not activity of this kind, 'unless one thinks that the pride of a country consists in the amount of publications.'<sup>47</sup>

In part, Holberg's critique of the younger Danish writers and their work must be interpreted in light of his general dissatisfaction with the constantly increasing flood of publications on the book market in these years. Whereas Holberg had reigned almost supreme as an author writing non-religious literature for a broad readership in the Danish language in the 1720s and early 1730s, he was forced to compete with a growing number of Danish writers from the 1740s. In his younger years, it was natural for Holberg to emphasize the lack of Danish books (he intended to write them) and the quality of the few that had been written (he had written them). From the 1740s, however, he felt 'pressured by the general upsurge of book production, not least within the general literature that he considered *his* domain, and he therefore complained about the new flood of books.'<sup>48</sup> Holberg's negative reaction to the younger moralists is no doubt motivated by a general dissatisfaction with increased competition and the concomitant threat this represented to the social status of the author. In the first volume of *Epistles* (1748), he complained that if the increase of books carried on unabated for 100 years, an author and an artisan would be considered as equals and learning would lose its value just as had happened to gold and silver in Europe when the American mines had been discovered.<sup>49</sup>

However, Holberg's attempt to dissociate himself from the new generation of moralists has another dimension, which has more specifically to do with what he defined as the requirements of a moralist. As we have seen, Holberg had in a recent work described moralizing as the common thread running through his literary production, and defined most of his works as different varieties or genres of moral philosophy. Holberg's reputation as a moralist was threatened, however, by the appearance of writers who had



neither the talent nor the decorum necessary to carry this responsibility. One can sense a certain apprehension of guilt by association in one of Holberg's comments on the correct way to moralize, namely to take care that 'permissible and useful moral writings do not turn into pasquills'. He had always warned against this and had never purposely attacked any concrete person, except when they had attacked him first (Andreas Hojer). In the latter case, he had already excused himself in his writings and confessed that it had been caused by a personal weakness. He did, however, feel a personal responsibility to prevent that new writers went too far:

I therefore say that it is of concern to me that our Danish and Norwegian moralists stay within the bounds that have been set so that I, who started such work in this country, shall not be held responsible for having given occasion to impermissible writings.<sup>50</sup>

He recapitulated that the office of the moralist required discernment, maturity and experience and repeated his criticism of the *Spectator*-journals in one of his posthumous epistles, where we hear echoes of his brush with controversy early in his career. The topic of the epistle was the risks involved in 'moralizing with characters' in the style of La Bruyère and Theophrastus: 'No manner of writing causes more trouble to an author.'<sup>51</sup> Readers always thought that the author was alluding to particular persons, no matter how innocent his intentions, as he himself had experienced this with *Peder Paars*. The *Danish Spectator* was another case in point. Whether or not the characters in this journal were aimed at specific people, this was how the public had perceived it. The public was even angrier when they discovered the (low) 'estate and quality [social standing]' of the author. Later, a foreign author who had only lived a short time in Denmark and did not even understand the language had provoked the public by criticizing faults in all the estates.<sup>52</sup>

The appearance of the new *Spectator*-journals on the Danish scene and the debate they sparked laid bare some of the underlying norms for Danish authors in the 1740s, especially the concern with personal criticism and with the age and standing of the author. The latter point was made in no uncertain terms when the writer Wille Høyberg, who was sympathetic to Jørgen Riis and his project, summarized the controversy ten years later:

People are partial in their judgements, their judgements are coloured, they judge a man by his clothes, by his estate and rank, but not by his virtue and reason. This is what happened here. When at first the author was thought to be a great man of distinction [Holberg], people made much of the journal and judged it highly; but when it transpired that he was nothing but a lowly creep of a student, the great gap between such unequal persons could cause very different opinions in the minds of people, who only judge by external reputation without knowing anything about the inner man and what is important.<sup>53</sup>



People could simply not tolerate being corrected by a twenty-nine-year-old theological student, and Jørgen Riis' *Danish Spectator* provided Holberg with a negative contrast to enhance the respectability of his own authorial persona and to position himself as the original and most competent moralist writer in Denmark-Norway.

### Concluding remarks

Ludvig Holberg started out his career as an author writing in what he would himself later describe as honourable (*ærbare*) genres, history and jurisprudence. Like many publications in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway, these works were introduced with dedications to the absolute monarch. After a few years, Holberg embarked on another, parallel career, as author of what he called humorous (or merry) works, i.e. satirical poems and comedies. None of these works contained dedications to the king. This was actually not a given; as Holberg himself rather humorously pointed out in one of his dedications to Frederick IV, most of his contemporaries dedicated their works to 'high potentates and great gentlemen' without considering what the work contained; works on grammar and encyclopaedias were dedicated to kings and princes, medical and agricultural books to statesmen, and books on seamanship to bishops and prelates.<sup>54</sup> Not so with Holberg, who maintained a division between the two distinct parts of his literary output. He did not actually distance himself from any of his more humorous works, but the apologetic tone in many of his prefaces and in the autobiographical letters suggest that they were not entirely unproblematic. This is particularly true of Holberg's satires, which appear to have caused him the most trouble in the form of condemnation, criticism and, as we saw, even the threat of litigation. The defence of satire as a useful way of correcting vice in society was consequently a topic to which Holberg returned repeatedly. His main arguments in favour of satire, as well as the basic distinction between permissible and impermissible forms of satire, were by no means original. Such arguments were as old as satire itself, and Holberg did not add anything novel either to classical satirists such as Juvenal, Persius or Horace or contemporaries such as Alexander Pope.<sup>55</sup>

What is special about Holberg is the context in which he wrote. As recent studies have shown, the legislation and censorship practices that regulated the printed word in Denmark-Norway were comparatively restrictive in a European perspective.<sup>56</sup> This is true not only with regard to the public discussion or criticism of political and religious matters, which was completely forbidden, but also with regard to criticism in general. Several scandals and literary feuds in the early eighteenth century testify to the touchiness and thin skin of public figures in a society obsessed with rank and honour.<sup>57</sup> As a satirist, Holberg therefore balanced on the fine line between illegality and legality, between respectability and scandal, and he cultivated a moralist persona as a defence against potential detractors. The arrival on the scene



of a younger generation of moralists in the 1740s, writers who described their own projects in similar terms to Holberg's in his *Moral Reflections*, provoked him to define the 'office' of the moralist in exclusive terms. Only a man of Holberg's stature, and with his 'discernment, age and experience', could shoulder the important but heavy responsibility of the moralist.

## Notes

- 1 <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/persona> (accessed 14.6.2016).
- 2 For the concept of persona in the history of philosophy, see Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger & Ian Hunter, 'Introduction' in *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: the Nature of a Contested Identity*, ed. Condren, Gaukroger and Hunter (Cambridge: 2006); See also the introduction in Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: 2001) and Ian Hunter, 'The history of philosophy and the persona of the philosopher', *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007): 571–600.
- 3 Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum, 'Scientific persona and their histories', *Science in Context*, 16 (2003): 2–3.
- 4 Herman Paul, 'What is a scholarly persona? Ten theses on virtues, skills and desires', *History and Theory* 53 (2014): 354.
- 5 The relationship between (philosophical) personae and the rhetorics of office in early modern Europe has been outlined in Conal Condren, 'Specifying the subject in early modern autobiography', in *Early Modern Autobiography. Theories, Genres, Practices*, ed. Phillippa Kelly, Lloyd David and Ronald Bedford (Ann Arbor, MI: 2006), 35–48; Conal Condren, 'The persona of the philosopher and the rhetorics of office in early modern England', in *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe*, 66–89.
- 6 *Natur- og Folkeretten*, 29.
- 7 Cf. chapter 9. The previous historical works were *Danmarks og Norges Beskrivelse* (1729) and *Dannemarks Riges Historie* (1732–5). Cf. chapter 8.
- 8 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, b1v.
- 9 *Kierke-Historie*, c2r. 'Hic Rhodus hic salta' translates as 'this is Rhodes, jump here' – meaning, show what you can instead of talking about it.
- 10 *Kierke-Historie*, c2r.
- 11 Lars Roar Langslet, *Ludvig Holberg. Den store ensomme. En biografi* (Oslo: 2001), 424.
- 12 *Moralske Tanker*, 2v
- 13 *Moralske Tanker*, 1. Cf. the Introduction, 19–21.
- 14 *Moralske Tanker*, 7–19.
- 15 *Moralske Tanker*, 20.
- 16 In the preface to the first volume of his *Epistler* (1748), Holberg again wrote about his life-long project of 'moralizing in all possible ways' and encouraged his readers to judge which of the many methods he had used (poems, satires, reflections on the deeds of heroes and heroines, serious moral reflections, fictional travels and epistles) they considered to be the most effective. *Epistler*, I, 3r–3v.
- 17 For more on Holberg's relationship to the topos of history as *magistra vitae*, see Anne Eriksen, 'Historiebegrep og historiske genre' in *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg*, ed. Jørgen Magnus Sejersted and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen (Oslo: 2014), 44 ff.
- 18 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3, c1r; For a similar claim, see *Moralske Tanker*, 47.



- 19 *Natur- og Folkeretten* (1716), a3r.
- 20 This post was held by the German natural lawyer and historian C.H. Amthor from 1714 to his death in 1721, then by Holberg's rival Andreas Hojer, who held the position from 1722 to 1730. The task of the two royal historiographers was to produce a monumental, annalistic history of Frederick IV's reign, inspired by Pufendorf's history of the reign of Charles X Gustavus. Between them they produced thirteen volumes covering the years 1699–1711. See Ellen Jørgensen, *Historieforskning og Historieskrivning i Danmark indtil Aar 1800* (Copenhagen: 1964), 163–164, 176–177.
- 21 *Danmarks og Norges Beskrivelse*, 3v.
- 22 These claims were made indirectly, as the opinions of the fictional illustrious gentleman to whom Holberg wrote his letter. *Ad virum perillustrem epistola*, 144.
- 23 *Ad virum perillustrem epistola*, 198.
- 24 Cf. chapter 3 and Langslet, *Ludvig Holberg*, 109–116.
- 25 Christian Bruun, *Ludvig Holbergs Peder Paars. Et Afsnit af en Holberg-Bibliographi* (Copenhagen: 1862), 56–82; Jens Bjerring-Hansen, *Ludvig Holberg på Bogmarkedet. Studier i Peder Paars og den litterære kultur i 1700-og 1800-tallet* (Copenhagen: 2015), 191–192.
- 26 Christian Bruun, *Frederik Rostgaards Liv og Levnet* (Copenhagen: 1870), 199–201; Bruun, *Holbergs Peder Paars*, 56–82; Bjerring-Hansen, *Ludvig Holberg på Bogmarkedet*, 191–196.
- 27 Bruun, *Holbergs Peder Paars*, 61.
- 28 Dirk Rose, *Conduite und Text: Paradigmen eines galanten Literaturmodells im Werk von Christian Friedrich Hunold (Menantes)* (Berlin: 2012), 99–101.
- 29 Johann Georg Walch, *Philosophisches Lexicon* [. . .] (Leipzig: 1726), 2176–2180. Christian Thomasius, *Cautelæ circa præcognita jurisprudentiæ* (Halle, Magdeburg: 1710), 107. August Friedrich Müller, *Balthasar Gracians Oracul, Das man mit sich führen, und stets bey den hand haben kan* [. . .] (Leipzig: 1733), 248–250. Walch's entire article was also quoted verbatim in the article on 'satyre' in J. H. Zedler, *Großes vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, 68 vols. (Halle, Leipzig: 1731–54), vol. 34, s.v. (236–239).
- 30 Eiliv Vinje, "Jeg har en heftig Lyst Satyricus at være . . ." Om Holberg som satiriker' in *Den mangfoldige Holberg*, ed. Eivind Tjønneland (Oslo: 2005), 244; see also Bjerring-Hansen, *Holberg på Bogmarkedet*, 196, note 62.
- 31 *Fire Skæmtedigte*, 2r.
- 32 *Peder Paars* (1720), 4v–5r.
- 33 Jens Kr. Andesen, *Fire Horats-studier. Om den horatsiske verssatire og Danmark* (Copenhagen: 1994), 105–106.
- 34 *Fire Skæmtedigte*, d2v.
- 35 *Metamorphosis*, 3r.
- 36 This echoes a similar claim in Just Justesen's preface to the third book of *Peder Paars*: 'Panegyrist are useless men [*otiosi homines*], not those who write moral comedies, because the former ruin the world with their flatteries as much as the latter edify it'. *Peder Paars*, 3rd ed. (Copenhagen: 1720), 3v.
- 37 *Moralske Tanker*, 217. For a similar argument, see Holberg, *Ad virum perillustrem epistola*, 204–205.
- 38 Vinje, "Jeg har en heftig Lyst Satyricus at være" . . . , 257.
- 39 *Ad virum perillustrem epistola*, 207
- 40 'Ad virum perillustrem epistola tertia', 24.
- 41 For examples of such errant attributions, see Ellen Krefting, Aina Nøding and Mona Ringvej, *En pokkers skrivesyge. 1700-tallets dansk-norske tidsskrifter mellom sensur og ytringsfrihet* (Oslo: 2014), 304, note 258. Cf. chapter 4 below.



- 42 Krefting, Nøding and Ringvej, *En pokkers skrivesyge*, 125.
- 43 Eiliv Vinje, 'Den danske Spectator (1744–5)' in *Opplysningens Tidsskrifter. Norske og danske periodiske publikasjoner på 1700-tallet*, ed. Eivind Tjønneland (Bergen: 2008), 15.
- 44 Vinje, 'Den danske Spectator,' 25–27.
- 45 *Adskillige Heltinder og Navnkundige Damers Sammenlignede Historie*, a6v.
- 46 *Heltinder og Navnkundige Damers Historie*, a7v.
- 47 *Heltinder og Navnkundige Damers Historie*, b3r.
- 48 F. J. Billeskov Jansen, *Kommentar til Epistel 1–183* (= Ludvig Holberg, *Epistler*, ed. F. J. Billeskov Jansen, 8 vols., Copenhagen: 1944–54), VI. (Copenhagen: 1946), 18.
- 49 *Epistler*, I, 18.
- 50 *Heltinder og Navnkundige Damers Historie*, b1r.
- 51 *Epistler*, III, 86.
- 52 This was a reference to the journal *La Spectatrice Danoise* (1748–50), edited by Laurent de la Beaumelle, a young French Huguenot. For more on this journal, see Ellen Krefting, 'Feminine forkledninger. *La Spectatrice Danoise* i 1700-tallets tidsskriftshistorie' in *Opplysningens Tidsskrifter*, ed. Tjønneland, 37–60.
- 53 Wille Høyberg, *Holbergiana. Kiøbenhavnske Samlinger af rare og utrykte Piecer*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: 1755),
- 54 *Danmarks og Norges Beskrivelse*, 3v.
- 55 Thomas E. Maresca, 'Pope's defense of satire: The first satire of the second book of Horace, imitated,' *ELH* 31 (1964): 366–394.
- 56 Krefting, Nøding and Ringvej, *En pokkers skrivesyge*; Øystein Rian, *Sensuren i Danmark-Norge. Vilåårene for offentlige ytringer i Danmark-Norge 1536–1814* (Oslo: 2014).
- 57 Eiliv Vinje, "En fri og skarp Kritik". Jacob Baden og litteraturkritikken i *Kritisk Journal* 1767–79', *Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning* 98 (2011): 112.



## 2 Holberg's autobiographical letters<sup>1</sup>

*Karen Skovgaard-Petersen*

During the last three decades of his life, Holberg published his autobiography in no fewer than four successive parts. Together they make up one of the most amusing, but also somewhat enigmatic memorial works in older Danish literature.<sup>2</sup> In the first letter, published in 1728, Holberg describes his life from his birth in 1684 up to 1727. The second – and by far the shortest – covers the nine years from 1728 to 1737; it was published as part of a collection of other Latin texts by Holberg. Six years later, in 1743, the third letter followed, likewise published together with further Latin texts and covering the intervening years, while the fourth and final letter was published posthumously in 1754 as one of Holberg's *Epistles*.

Holberg's overwhelming influence on Danish and Norwegian cultural life is due to the fact that he created a literature in Danish. But three of his main works are written in Latin; the novel *Niels Klim's Travels Underground*, his epigrams (of which he wrote almost 1,000), and three of the four autobiographical letters. The fourth – the one from 1754 – is in Danish.

It is a reasonable assumption that his choice of Latin for the three autobiographical letters was motivated by a wish to reach a foreign audience and, judging from the contemporary editions and translations, he succeeded at least to some extent. The first letter was re-edited in Frankfurt and Leipzig in 1736 and again in Leipzig in 1737, together with the second letter. An anonymous German translation (by Georg August Detharding) appeared in 1745, 1754 and 1763 (and in a modernized version in 1926); it also formed the basis of a Dutch translation in 1765. The first English translation only appeared in 1827. Also Danish translations soon saw the light, the first one, by T. G. Krohn in 1741, comprised the first two letters, while an anonymous translation of all three Latin letters was published in 1745. The latter has sometimes, but unconvincingly, been attributed to Holberg himself.<sup>3</sup> Once the pragmatic choice of Latin was made, it carried with it a number of rhetorical possibilities and had profound implications for the literary devices employed. Like the novel *Niels Klim's Travels Underground*, the three letters are deeply influenced by classical literature and full of verbal



borrowings from Roman authors. The form is, again like *Niels Klim*, prosimetric. Lines of poetry, taken from the classical Roman poets, are inserted into the prose.

The autobiographical letters *are* letters, strictly speaking. They are addressed to an anonymous nobleman, a *Vir Perillustris*, who is presented as a close friend, at whose request Holberg has written about his life. Moreover, this man is the alleged editor of the first letter. Also in this respect, the fictive editorial frame, the first letter resembles *Niels Klim* and indeed all of Holberg's fictional texts (except the late work *Moral Fables* from 1751). Various attempts have been made, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to identify this man as a historical figure, but there can be no doubt that he is fictive.<sup>4</sup> In the *Autobiographical Letters*, with their explicit commitment to historical truth, the fictive setting does, however, create a particular tension. Towards the end of the first letter, Holberg even bluntly declares: 'I always lie in humorous contexts, but seldom in serious matters,'<sup>5</sup> a teasing admission that may well leave the reader of his autobiography somewhat bewildered. What can we trust? This tension is an intriguing aspect of the first of the three letters, as we shall see. Another fictionalizing element is the many borrowings from Roman literature. Their function and, more broadly, Holberg's dialogue with Roman literature throughout the autobiographical letters, will take up the latter half of this chapter.

As a consequence of this focus on the Latin language and the role of Roman literature, the fourth autobiographical letter, the one in Danish, has not been taken into account in the present article. This letter is included, as no. 447, among Holberg's *Epistles* (1748–54), a collection of ca. 540 essays offering Holberg's subjective reflections on a wide number of subjects.<sup>6</sup> As a whole, they may be said to be a continuation of the autobiographical letters in the sense that they are formed as letters addressed to an anonymous and fictional friend.

### A writer's autobiography

The first and longest of the three letters – 212 pages in octavo – differs from the two others by its strong element of anecdotal episodes and personal experiences. Holberg's childhood and youth in Norway, his years of study in Copenhagen, and particularly his travels in Europe, take up the greater part, and through the anecdotes an indirect self-portrait is drawn. An early instance is the ghost story from Holberg's youth when he spent a night in fear over what he and his companions were convinced was a ghost. They finally realize that it was just another member of the family who had taken refuge in their bed because of his own bedfellow's snoring, and Holberg adds that as a reaction to his own panic he fell into the opposite extreme and developed a distinct scepticism towards ghosts and spirits. But, he concludes, we have to stick to the middle road between the



extremes of superstition and scepticism. The ghost story thus gains a certain programmatic function.

The self-irony of this episode turns out to be a recurrent feature in his portrait of himself. When as a young man he spends some months in the Norwegian town Kristiansand, he acquires a somewhat undeserved reputation for his ability as a language teacher. But when a Dutch merchant arrives, he faces competition as a teacher of French. It comes to a duel in French and 'probably the French language has never been treated worse' (p. 24).

However, he was apparently a versatile speaker of several languages. On board a ship in the Mediterranean, he and his fellow passengers only narrowly escape a pirate attack, and afterwards, discussing the outcome if the pirates had attacked, they agree that Holberg, thin and weak as he was, would simply have been thrown into the sea, while he himself assumes that his language abilities would have secured him a position as secretary to a Turkish magnate (p. 98). Shortly before, he has confessed that his miserable appearance made him harmless in the eyes of a jealous husband who assumed that he could be entrusted with the custody of any Turkish or Persian harem (p. 93–94). Likewise, he exposes his own egocentrism to ridicule when he has been given expectancy of a professorship and is annoyed that none of the professors would have the courtesy to die and hand over the vacant position to him (p. 119–120).

In short, Holberg has a keen eye for the comic effect of exposing his own shortcomings. Other episodes contribute to characterize his intellectual positions. He renders with some pride his own subtle argumentation in favour of Protestantism, which he had used in a discussion with a Catholic in Paris (p. 171–176). At an earlier point, Holberg reveals that he was suspected of having converted to Catholicism, and there may be an apologetic intention behind his rendering of this discussion. Indeed, Holberg's ironical exposure of his own shortcomings in the first letter goes hand in hand with his eagerness to defend himself against criticism to which he has been unjustly exposed. This theme is struck from the very beginning, albeit indirectly, when Holberg makes the *Vir Perillustris* declare that he has undertaken to publish this autobiographical letter since the author has met much undeserved criticism. In the course of the letter, Holberg sometimes hints that he has met criticism and acquired enemies, a theme that gains momentum once he touches upon his literary disputes with his rival Andreas Hojer.<sup>7</sup> Towards the end when he reaches the 1720s, the focus of attention is on his early literary successes – *Peder Paars* (1719–20), the satires (1721–2), the comedies (1723–5), *Metamorphosis* (1726) – and, not least, the public polemics these writings had given rise to. The letter ends with a psychological self-portrait, as we shall see.

In the brief second letter – fourteen pages in octavo – the destructive fire of Copenhagen in 1728 and its consequences for society and for Holberg himself dominate.<sup>8</sup> As part of his reflections on his own health and temper, Holberg underlines that his improved living conditions have not made him change his modest ways. His two main works from this period, *Description*



of *Denmark and Norway* (1729) and *History of Denmark* (1732–5), are given some attention.

The third letter tells briefly about the circumstances of Holberg's life and then concentrates on his literary output and its reception in the period 1737–43: *General Church History* (1738), *Lives of Heroes* (1739), *Niels Klim* (1741), *Jewish History* (1742). Then follows a self-portrait with focus on the intellectual dimension: Holberg's judgements on authors, classical as well as recent, his opinions and positions, religious views, his insistence on tolerance in religious matters, his commitment to investigation and scrutiny, his views on Newton and Descartes. Again he finds room for both a psychological self-dissection and a description of his ways of living: We are told about his acquisition of landed property, his struggles with the discomforts of old age, his declining interest in politics and increasing appreciation of superficial conversation, his reasons for not marrying. Finally, he underlines his commitment to tolerance.<sup>9</sup>

Only about half of the third letter is autobiographical. After 98 pages, Holberg has inserted an essay (of thirty-nine pages) about the national character of diverse European countries. Resuming the autobiographical thread Holberg briefly accounts for his views on a number of academic disciplines, and then concludes with another essay in six parts on moral philosophy, an outline of a moral system which he later elaborated in Danish in his *Moral Reflections* (1744).<sup>10</sup>

As a whole, the three letters constitute Holberg's self-portrait as a writer: His literary output, his intellectual positions, his circumstances of living, his temper and his mentality are in focus. But the reader who expects to find straightforward facts and information about Holberg's life and career, his friendships and his family, will be disappointed. Even the first letter, with all its episodes from the young Holberg's travels, leaves many factual questions unanswered. Also in other respects this first and longest letter differs from the others. It is in this letter that he explores the tension between fictional pretence and commitment to historical truth by playing with the illusion of privacy, to which we shall now turn.

### The illusion of privacy

All three letters addressed to the anonymous friend, the *Vir Perillustris*, purport to be written at his request. In a brief introductory note to the first letter, where this figure is most prominent, Holberg lets him explain that he has published the letter without Holberg's knowledge. The illusion allows Holberg to let the *Vir Perillustris* praise Holberg's witty and playful literary creativity. At the same time, the element of self-defence is present from the beginning, for the editor is made to suggest that his reason for publishing the letter is the many attacks the author has suffered as a result of his writings. Moreover, the fictive editor is sure that this letter will convince sceptical readers that Danish is a worthy literary language.



Throughout the first letter, the illusion is maintained that the autobiography is meant only for the eyes of the *Vir Perillustris*. This goes even for the *errata* list at the end of the book. Here Holberg, speaking as himself, appears somewhat displeased with the fact that the letter has been published, written as it is for the eyes of a personal friend.

The illusion of privacy creates an impression of informal confidence. The *Vir Perillustris* is a close friend and a warm supporter of Holberg's. Holberg relies, for instance, on his understanding when he complains that his abstinence from wine has often been criticized, and he appeals to his friend's sense of humour when describing his unheroic attempt, ill and exhausted as he was, to join in the afore-mentioned defence against pirates. It is in order to comply with his friend's wish that he has added the final self-portrait (p. 199). Indeed, his exhortations have been among Holberg's important motives to become a writer (p. 212). The *Vir Perillustris* agrees with Holberg on the moral qualities of Holberg's comedies, and like Holberg himself the *Vir Perillustris* regrets that they are no longer played (p. 143).

The pretended confidence is underlined by ludicrous confidentialities: Holberg begs his friend not to let anybody know that he was grossly ignorant of scholastic logic because he did not think it worth knowing (p. 51) – as was clear to anyone acquainted with early works such as *Peder Paars* or *Jacob von Tyboe*. And only to the *Vir Perillustris* will he confess that he kneeled to the Pope when visiting Rome, even though he is a good Lutheran. But he then 'justifies' himself by pointing out that he is not the sort of Lutheran who refuses to pay his respect to 'a prince of another confession' (p. 111–112). In other words, he takes a comical swipe not only at Catholics but also at Lutherans who – presumably out of religious zeal – neglect to treat the Pope as anything but a worldly prince. These attitudes were hardly a secret to anyone, but they get emphasis by being introduced as such. By treating as matters of confession opinions that he considered to be obviously true, he made their denial appear ludicrous.

In the short second letter, we meet the *Vir Perillustris* in the beginning, where it appears that he has eagerly asked Holberg to continue his autobiography. Towards the end of the letter, after the dramatic account of the fire of Copenhagen and a description of Holberg's literary production in the period, Holberg turns to the *Vir Perillustris* as his supporter against the critics in whose eyes he neglects his serious university duties, such as declamations. Likewise, Holberg refers to the addressee's explicit exhortations to include material about his life style – again with an emphasis on their shared views, this time regarding the common but futile pursuit of noble titles. In the third letter, the *Vir Perillustris* is similarly in the background, indeed even more so: Holberg recognizes a slight disagreement between them – whereas his friend regards Virgil as the best Roman poet, Holberg himself prefers Ovid. Later it appears that it was the *Vir Perillustris* who made Holberg add the chapter on the national characters of diverse European peoples.



### The power to select – and to lie

The pseudo-intimacy with the *Vir Perillustris* which runs through the first letter also makes Holberg play with the borderlines of reliability. He assures his noble friend of his sincere commitment to truth. Having related the dramatic encounters with the pirate ship, he says:

I could have spiced up my text by impressive details as those people do who prefer entertaining lies to naked truth by describing how many hours we fought against the Turks, what splendid feats we performed, how many pirates I managed to kill with my sword etc. But I prefer the label of naked truth to the label of empty bragging.<sup>11</sup>

Lying was a possibility, but Holberg refrained. Still he leaves us somewhat uncertain by reminding us of this temptation to exaggerate and lie.

Towards the end of the letter, telling about his sojourn in Paris 1725–6, Holberg assures the *Vir Perillustris* that since he is so insightful, Holberg will not lie to him:

Perhaps you expect me to go into details about Parisian court life that I have never seen. Had I written to a man of lesser intelligence than you, I might also have done that in order that people should not accuse me of having wasted my time in Paris. But writing to you, a friend and a philosopher, I do not hesitate to confess that I have never seen Versailles and Fontainebleau. But let this remain between us! If someone else should ask me for such a description, I will tell him that the King was handsome and merry and strong, the Queen mild and pious etc. Who could accuse me of lying? For this is true – but I have only learned it from rumour (p. 185).

In other words, Holberg might well have lied to a man of lesser insight – since no one would have discovered. Indeed, he does not rule out that he will do so in other circumstances. Here it seems that the *Vir Perillustris*, the addressee-and-editor, is also a guarantor of reliability, of truth. But this addressee is himself a fiction.

The issue of trustworthiness is also raised when Holberg takes up his obligations as reporter of reality and the demands of historiography that his narrative has to fulfill. Describing his arrival on the small Danish island of Sprogø, he poses as a serious travelling topographer aware of his duty to inform his readers, as truthfully as possible, about his experiences among exotic peoples. Although it lies outside the scope of his modest text to insert pleasant geographical descriptions, he says, he will allow himself to deviate from his usual practice, since this island has hitherto not been object of description.

This turns out to be an amusing parody. Holberg can tell nothing about the local constitution since the viceregent (*prorex*) has left the island, and he



must focus on the character of the local people (*indolis gentis*); the *metropolis* of the island consists of one house inhabited by an old greedy woman and her two pugnacious daughters. Instead of a serious topographical account, Holberg makes it all come to nothing. This is a device he had used to great effect in his mock-epic *Peder Paars*; small matters are being raised to the level of serious epic or, as here, historiography.

Similarly, Holberg plays with the role as serious historian in his account of his stay in Rome. Here he learns to cook a simple minestrone. But he will not go into detail about its preparation, he declares in a direct address to the *Vir Perillustris*, even though, as he admits, he hereby breaks the law of historiography (*lex historiæ*). In this case he prefers to run the risk of being looked upon as a negligent historian rather than expose himself to the harsh judgment of French gourmets. Again Holberg establishes a clash between the small subject matter – cooking of soup – and the lofty invocation of the principles of historiography. And it turns out that his commitment to the *lex historiæ* has its limits; the scorn of the gourmets is too serious a threat.

In short, the issue of trustworthiness, the element of construction, is present throughout the first letter. Playing with conventions of both letter-writing and historiography, Holberg teasingly reminds us of his power to select and to leave out, to decide what should count as truth and what not. The reader is left in intrigued uncertainty.

### The Latin quotations and allusions

Although all the three autobiographical letters are framed as private letters to the fictitious nobleman, this elaborate play with fiction is particular to the first letter. But in terms of style, the three Latin letters may be said to share a fictionalizing element. They are all written in a Latin prose imbued with words, phrases and even longer passages borrowed more or less *verbatim* from classical Roman authors, in particular Petronius, Plautus, Pliny the Younger and Cicero. Brief poetical quotations from Roman poets – e.g. Juvenal, Horace, Ovid, Virgil – are interspersed throughout, graphically marked as verse. With a few exceptions, the sources of the quotations are not indicated, but they belong to the canon of Roman classics, and Holberg could be fairly certain that his readers would recognize them – and appreciate the extra layers of meaning they add to his text.<sup>12</sup> Holberg adopted the same strategy of interspersing classical borrowings, using the same prosimetric form, in *Niels Klim*. A close source of inspiration is the novel *Utopia* by the Jesuit Jacob Bidermann (1640), whose influence on Holberg may be detected not only in *Niels Klim* and in the autobiographical letters, but also in his comedies.

A famous instance of his extensive use of the Roman literary classics is his description, in the second letter, of the fire of Copenhagen in 1728. This event is described with heavy borrowings from a number of classics, primarily Pliny the Younger's account of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD



in two letters to the historian Tacitus (VI 16 and 20). Holberg, for instance, describes the general panic in these words of Pliny:

You could hear the shrieks of women, the crying of children and the shouts of men. There were even some who augmented the real perils by imaginary terrors.<sup>13</sup>

The recent Danish disaster is merged with the famous classical catastrophe as told by Pliny, and the effect is one of monumentalizing tragedy.

Sometimes the classicizing discourse carries a quite different, comic effect created by the clash between the mundane episodes and the resonance from Roman literature. An example is Holberg's confrontations with the angry border guards when travelling in Europe:

From which corners of the world  
have you come to this place? Where are you heading?  
What is your origin and where is your home?

These lines are small poetic bits from the *Aeneid* of Virgil.<sup>14</sup> The transformation from their original solemnity to the impatient and annoying border guards is another instance of Holberg's unmasking of grandiose self-importance.

In these examples, the original context of the quotation adds extra meaning to the narrative. In other cases, quotations ignore their original context. In the third letter, for instance, Holberg characterizes Englishmen as straightforward in religious matters: 'they consider it disgraceful to keep one thing concealed in the breast, and another ready on the tongue.'<sup>15</sup> This phrase is taken from Sallust's *Catiline*, but there the point is negative: 'Ambition prompted many to become deceitful; To keep one thing concealed in the breast, and another ready on the tongue.'<sup>16</sup> In Holberg's text it serves as a well-turned formulation of the general psychological phenomenon that humans are able to pretend and to conceal their real motives.

This element of common experience in some cases applies to entire episodes. In Genoa, Holberg, as he tells us in the first letter, witnessed a fight between one of his acquaintances and an innkeeper. He himself kept a safe distance behind a door:

It came to a fight. The young man hit the villain in the head with his clenched sharp knuckles. Nor did the other man hold his hand but struck his enemy's face with his outstretched hand. I saw everything through a hole in the folding of the doors putting each eye to the chink by turns.<sup>17</sup>

These lines are composed of bits from a passage in Petronius' *Satyricon*, where the poet Eumolpus and his friends become involved in a fight with an innkeeper, and the narrator himself watches behind a door.



There is a fictionalizing element in Holberg's close verbal borrowings. In this case it is difficult to tell to what extent his own experience was similar to that of Encolpius and his friends in Petronius' novel. But the point is rather that the features he borrows from Petronius concern typical fights and frights, just as the features he takes over from Pliny in his account of the fire of Copenhagen describe general and typical aspects of fire and panic. Likewise, the angry questions of the border guards that are formulated in lines of Virgil, portray the impatience and do not, of course, render a concrete phrasing.

It is a common effect of the classical quotations in Holberg's autobiography that events and persons and phenomena are raised from the concrete context into a more exalted level of general human experience.<sup>18</sup> While the teasing play with fiction, as we have seen, is a recurrent feature of Holberg's first autobiographical letter, his dialogue with the Roman classics, that runs through all the three letters, belongs to another realm of shared human experience.

### Know thyself

This classical dialogue plays a central role in Holberg's portrait of himself. Towards the end of the first letter, Holberg launches a catalogue of his weaknesses. Among his faults he mentions his impatience with other people, in particular windbags and braggarts. This is formulated in the words of Horace's *Satire* I, 9, which describes the poet's exasperation at being followed by a troublesome stranger (I, 9 v. 31–33, 10). This is Holberg's point of departure for a defence of his writing of satire, and here the classical Roman satirists, Horace and Juvenal, play a prominent role. 'Some people think that I am much too brutal in my satires, and would prefer that I wrote praise instead of ridicule', Holberg declares with reflections borrowed from Horace's *Satire* II, 1 (v. 1, vv. 16–22). But Holberg defends himself: It is vices I attack, not men – using the words of Pliny (I, 10). Shortly after, he draws on Juvenal, declaring that 'many people do not understand how I can find pleasure in running on this race course' (that is, satirical poetry). Holberg, in other words, portrays himself as a satirical writer in the tradition from the great Roman satirists. Using their words and speaking with their voice, he reminds his readers of the useful work performed by satirists and the harsh conditions they have to suffer, then as now – and always. The classical borrowings add a timeless quality.

However, it is not only in his capacity as satirist that Holberg draws a line back to the Roman masters. It is his particular merit to have created a literature in Danish, he tells the *Vir Perillustris* at the very end of the letter, which means that his compatriots no longer have to consult foreign books on morals. Holberg here resumes a theme that had been struck up already on the first page, in the introduction of the *Vir Perillustris*: Holberg's works demonstrate, the *Vir Perillustris* declares, that it is possible to compose literature in the Danish language. Here, at the very end of the letter, Holberg



uses words adapted from Cicero's proud declaration (in his philosophical treatise *De divinatione* II, 2,5) that his aim is to create a Roman philosophical literature which will make it superfluous for the Romans to consult the Greek. By using Cicero's words, Holberg makes it clear that his efforts for Danish literature are on a par with Cicero's for Roman philosophy. Cicero and Holberg share an educational mission.

Holberg also conducts a dialogue with classical moral philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of the first letter he engages in a fascinating mental self-dissection. First Holberg describes his ascetic and frugal way of living, which has often been ridiculed by other people. He suffers from an illness running in his family, which is somehow connected to his unstable and contrasting moods. He is aware that he has responded too aggressively to criticism, and such hotheadedness is particularly reproachable in a moral philosopher such as him. This reasoning is taken *verbatim* from Cicero's philosophical dialogue *Tusculanae disputationes*: A philosopher should not fail in the art of right living in which he professes to be an expert. On the contrary, it is argued at some length in Cicero's dialogue, anger should be kept under control. Also these reflections are taken over more or less directly by Holberg, who agrees that anger is not to be cultivated but has to admit his own inability to suppress his temper (p. 199–207).

In the third letter, written 16–17 years later, Holberg picked up this psychological thread. Again he stresses his own inconstancy but this time with an emphasis on the difference between sudden, irrational impulse and calm and rational reflection. And again he enters into a dialogue with Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes*. Having noted signs of change in his mentality with old age, he admits that he has never been able to practice moral philosophy, that is, he has never been able to control his strong feelings. Once passion has overcome him, it is no use reading the ancient philosophers, stuffed with sensible admonitions though they are, but afterwards, when anger has resided and sense has taken control, he reads them with delight and profit. The point is not the constant change between contrasting moods in itself, as in the first letter, but the contrast between his immediate and his reflected reactions. The Stoicism articulated in Cicero's dialogues is present as an ideal but rejected as impossible.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout his writings, Holberg never tired of underlining the importance of the Socratic exhortation to 'Know thyself.' As an allegorical illustration it even decorated the handle of his walking stick, a swan biting the nose of a face placed on its own breast.<sup>21</sup> He often used it as an exhortation to humility, to know one's right place in society, to realize how one might serve the community best. But it was also in his view an exhortation to conduct an honest, disillusionary self-dissection, as he demonstrates in the autobiographical letters. 'To know oneself is the primary obligation of the philosopher', he declares in the introduction to his parallel biographies of Socrates and Epaminondas.<sup>22</sup> In his view, Socrates rightly insisted that all knowledge must be based on self-knowledge.<sup>23</sup>



Holberg, as he himself tells us, may well lie in humorous contexts, but rarely in serious matters. And in the first letter, he does indeed time and again leave the reader uncertain about the limits between truth and fiction. But his insistence on conducting a scrutiny of himself, a self-dissection, in dialogue with classical moral philosophy is indeed a serious matter. We need not doubt his sincerity when he portrays himself, both directly and indirectly, as a man of the middle road, endowed with humour and self-irony, but also of an irritable temperament, a writer thoroughly familiar with classical literature and moral philosophy, who has taught his Danish-Norwegian compatriots to reflect on moral issues.

## Notes

- 1 I am greatly indebted to Finn Gredal Jensen, Society for Danish Language and Literature, for help and advice in all phases of the work on this article.
- 2 The Danish and Norwegian literature on Holberg's autobiographical letters is considerable. With a focus on the enigmatic character of the letters, Ejnar Thomsen gives a useful overview of the older literature in *Sfinxen. Streger til et Holberg-portræt* (Copenhagen: 1954). See also Eiliv Vinje, *Eit språk som ikkje passar. Epideiktiske element i Holbergs reflekterande prosa* (Bergen: 2000), 154ff, with further references.
- 3 See H. Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi over Holbergs skrifter*, vol. 1–3 (Copenhagen: 1933–35), I: 97ff. A number of Danish translations have since appeared, and a new one, by Ole Thomsen, is forthcoming.
- 4 This has been argued by C.W. Elberling, 'Holbergiana quaedam,' *Danske Samlinger* 4 (1868–9): 273–287 and later demonstrated in more detail by Christian Bruun, *Om Ludvig Holbergs trede Epistler til en højfornem Herre* (Copenhagen: 1895), 9ff. Eiliv Vinje has summed up this older *Vir Perillustris*-debate in *Eit språk som ikkje passar. Epideiktiske element i Holbergs reflekterande prosa* (Bergen: 2000), 120–21.
- 5 *Ad virum perillustrem epistola* (s.l. [Copenhagen]: s.d. [1728]), 208. In the third edition of this letter (published together with the first ed. of the second letter in 1737; see note 12 below), Holberg modified this statement: 'I sometimes lie in humorous contexts, but never in serious matters' (207). All translations from Holberg are mine and page references in the text are to the *Epistola* in *Holbergs Skrifter*.
- 6 Cf. chapter 4.
- 7 See 5–6 and 70–71.
- 8 'Ad virum perillustrem epistola secunda', in *Ludovici Holbergii Opuscula quaedam Latina* (Leipzig: 1737), 213–228.
- 9 'Ad virum perillustrem epistola tertia', in *Lud. Holbergii Opusculorum Latinorum pars altera* (Copenhagen: 1743), 1–192.
- 10 See 87–90.
- 11 *Ad virum perillustrem epistola*, 96–97.
- 12 The great majority of quotations were identified by Aage Kragelund in his edition of the autobiographical letters, *Ludvig Holbergs tre Levnedsbreve, 1728–43*, I–III, ed. Aage Kragelund (Copenhagen: 1965). Cf. Kragelund, *Ludvig Holberg, Citatkunstneren: Holberg og den yngre Plinius* (Copenhagen: 1962). The significance of the individual quotations has been further discussed by Finn Gredal Jensen in his online edition (2015) in *Ludvig Holbergs skrifter*.
- 13 Holberg, 'Ad virum perillustrem epistola secunda', 217–218. Cf. Pliny *Epistolae*. VI 20, 14–15, transl. William Melmoth, rev. W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge, MA: 1931).



- 14 Holberg, *Ad virum perillustrem epistola*, 55. The lines are from Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1, 331; *Eclogues*, 9, 1; and *Aeneid*, 8, 114, but Holberg has borrowed this particular combination from Jacob Bidermann's *Utopia* (Dillingen: 1640), 38.
- 15 Holberg, 'Ad virum perillustrem epistola tertia', 64.
- 16 Sallust, *Conspiracy of Catiline*, 10, 5, transl. John Selby Watson (New York and London: 1899). The phrase may well have lived its own life in later Latin prose, separated from Sallust's text.
- 17 *Epistola* (1728), 88.
- 18 Cf. Kragelund in his introduction to *Ludvig Holbergs tre Levnedsbreve*, I, xxxi–xxxv.
- 19 I am here greatly indebted to Ole Thomsen's forthcoming monograph, *Pessimist og munter*, an inspiring study of Holberg's view of human nature and its deep roots in Hellenistic-Roman moral philosophy.
- 20 A point stressed by Ole Thomsen throughout *Pessimist og Munter*.
- 21 This motive was widespread in Holberg's day as an illustration of the exhortation to 'Know thyself.' The significance of this handle as an expression of one of the central themes of Holberg's writings was pointed out by Bent Holm, 'Det civiliserede kaos. Maskerade-motivet iflg. Ludvig Holberg, Vilhelm Andersen og Carl Nielsen', *Kultur og Klasse* 87 (1999): 11–40.
- 22 *Adskillige Store Heltes og Berømmelige Mænds . . . Historier*, II, 466.
- 23 *Epistler* I, 313–317 (No. 58).



**Part II**

**Morals**





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### 3 Holberg's *Law of Nature and Nations*

*Knud Haakonssen*

#### Why natural law?

In 1716, the thirty-two-year-old Ludvig Holberg published a work on 'the law of nature and nations' that was substantially derived from Samuel Pufendorf's two main works on this subject. Most of the structure and chapter headings were taken from Pufendorf's *De officio hominis et civis* (1673), while a great deal of the text, including examples and literary references, was closely paraphrased – in some passages directly translated – from the German author's *De jure naturae et gentium* (1672). To this Pufendorbian corpus Holberg added material from and comments on other prominent natural lawyers, such as Hugo Grotius, John Selden, Richard Cumberland, Christian Thomasius and, in the second edition (1728), Jean Barbeyrac. Holberg used these thinkers, as well as authors in other genres, to reinforce, illustrate, vary or dispute Pufendorf. He introduced into this natural law literature considerations of divine positive law (Scripture) and secular positive law, both Roman and, especially, Danish and Norwegian, just as he used examples from Nordic history alongside the usual topoi from classical literature. By modern standards, this was a plagiarized work garnished with much incidental material; Holberg would today be dismissed from any academic job; and if modern copyright had existed (and had been renewed by Pufendorf's heirs), he and his publisher would be sued for damages and forced to withdraw the book. Yet, Holberg proclaimed as prominently as he could exactly what he was doing. The title page of the first edition reads: *Introduction to the Theory of the Law of Nature and Nations. Drawn from the Writings of the most Prominent Jurists, notably Grotius, Pufendorf and Thomasius. Illustrated by Examples from Nordic History, and Conferred with our Danish and Norwegian Laws, Directives and Regulations.*<sup>1</sup> Not only did Holberg make it plain what he was doing, it was obviously eminently acceptable to his contemporaries, for they kept using the work so that it saw six editions in the eighteenth century, five of them in his lifetime and some of these with his extensive additions, to which came translations into German (1748) and Swedish (1789).<sup>2</sup>



What to us looks like plagiarism does in fact provide a key to understanding the point of Holberg's work. Since Holberg laid himself so close to Pufendorf, why did he not simply translate and annotate the latter's work? This was after all a procedure within the new natural law that had established itself through multiple editions of Pufendorf's two works in English, French and German during the decades before Holberg published.<sup>3</sup> Part of the answer seems to be that Pufendorf's works were too academic, the *De jure* a huge formal treatise and the *De officio* a textbook designed for Pufendorf's lectures at the new University of Lund in the 1670s.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Holberg did not yet have a secure academic position, but he did have ambitions of providing the means for a broad civic education. This was a theme in much of his work throughout his life, and it was explicit in the Preface to his natural law work. By avoiding the presumption of translating, he had a free hand to do as he pleased with his academic sources, including freedom to shape his own language. Among the things he could thus leave out, the most striking was the metaphysical discussions of the ontological status of moral phenomena that we find in Pufendorf's major work. This aversion to metaphysics was a basic feature of all Holberg's thought. With his title-page announcement of having 'drawn from the Writings of the most prominent Jurists', and with his prefatory brief history of moral thought, Holberg also signalled his adoption of the eclectic approach that dominates in major parts of his work.<sup>5</sup>

While a concern with civic education, linguistic and stylistic freedom and the preservation of authorial autonomy may be plausible explanations of Holberg's choice of Pufendorf as a lead text rather than a copy text, it does raise the question, why natural law at all? In order to answer this question, we have to understand that natural law – and especially Pufendorf's formulation of it – was *the* smart modern subject. It was serving a number of functions in many parts of Europe in the wake of the major seventeenth-century political settlements of 1648 and 1688–9 and their many subsequent adjustments, and it was needed also in Denmark-Norway, but here the need was of such a nature that Holberg's balancing act was particularly apt: the new subject clearly had a local function, but mainly if presented in the vernacular and in a style and manner adapted to the domestic audience. That audience had both legal, political and civic components, and our understanding of Holberg's natural law must be guided by these.

During the eighteenth century, there was no requirement of a formal education for the practice of law in Denmark-Norway. A formal law degree was first instituted in 1736, and the practice of law – on both sides of the bench – was largely conducted by men without any systematic legal training and often rather limited education at all, except for the assessors at the High Court in Copenhagen, several of whom were professors at the University.<sup>6</sup> Ancient law of the Danish and Norwegian provinces and the recent codifications of Danish and Norwegian law (1683 and 1687, respectively) were in the vernacular.<sup>7</sup> The legal system in the two countries, while certainly



touched by Roman law both directly and through ecclesiastical law, was nevertheless much less influenced by its revival than the European countries to the south. Apart from its legacy in church law, Roman law remained an academic pursuit (and there was only one professor of law to pursue it).<sup>8</sup> In many parts of Europe, especially in German lands, the judicial deficit that arose through the development of territorial states with centralized sovereignty and through the growth of commerce was attempted met, among other things, by a jurisprudence based on Roman law, sometimes in tandem with, sometimes in competition with, natural law.<sup>9</sup> In the Nordic double monarchy this need was as great as elsewhere and arguably greater, since the two codes in many ways were already old-fashioned when instituted. But given that there was no Roman law background to build on, and no Latinate legal culture outside of the University, a vernacular presentation of natural law fitted the Nordic bill. The natural law that was being developed by the thinkers whom Holberg drew on was heavily imbued with Roman law materials that could be used for modern purposes. What is more, being 'natural', it was not tainted by being 'foreign' in the way that Romanist, not to speak of German, juridical ideas were. At the same time, one of the ways in which natural law developed in this period was by the adoption of more and more Roman law material, and Holberg was himself involved in this. Significantly, it was not least in the law of contract that Roman ideas were used to fill lacunae in natural and domestic law, as we see in Holberg and several of his contemporaries.

Most of these considerations were the ones that Holberg himself later gave as his motivation for writing the natural law book.<sup>10</sup> Seen in this perspective, it is hardly surprising that Holberg placed as much Nordic law as he did within the framework of natural law. It was part of the domestication of the latter. The demand for natural law as a supplementary legal resource and the consequent need for its adaptation to the particular local audience continued for much of the eighteenth century. This seems to be part of the explanation for the several editions of Holberg's work and for the eventual translation of Pufendorf himself, for even after the formalization of legal education at the University, a degree was not necessary for practice, and the degree itself was at two levels, a simple Danish one (in natural law and Danish law), and a proper Latin degree. Other evidence for the utility of this parochial natural law is its continuous presence in the deliberations of the High Court during the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

The legal role of the natural law that Holberg presented was part of its much wider social and political functions. The subject was designed to be a comprehensive treatment of morals, politics and law – an early form of 'civics' – for political leaders and, in an absolutist monarchy, officials. It had been introduced already in the 1630s at the Academy for the Nobility at Sorø on Zealand but only flourished from the 1690s onwards,<sup>12</sup> when natural law was adopted at the Academy's short-lived successor in Copenhagen from 1690 to 1710,<sup>13</sup> and it was apparently taught at the University at the



same time.<sup>14</sup> Within or associated with these institutions there was a group of natural law thinkers and historians, most of whom had studied the subject at German universities, especially Halle, some of them at the University of Kiel. All of them were deeply imbued with the varieties of natural law that had become dominant in the Protestant universities during the latter part of the seventeenth century, and the divisions between ‘Christian’ natural law and the ‘secularizing’ ideas that Pufendorf had made prominent and Thomasius further developed ran as deep in Denmark as in Germany.<sup>15</sup> Holberg was close to this group of natural lawyers, having been accepted into the circle (or at least the remarkable library) of the leading figure in the largely Pufendorfian camp, Christian Reitzer.<sup>16</sup> However, Holberg was by temperament no camp follower, and he also retained sufficiently much of the Christian moralist to be nervous of the more radical Thomasian ideas, as we shall see. To which came his personal bitter rivalry with another of Reitzer’s brilliant protégés, Andreas Hojer. We will touch upon these issues in the following, but a fuller interpretation of Holberg’s *Law of Nature* than can be undertaken here would have to place the work more precisely in this tangle of ideological and personal concerns.

In the wider context, it has to be noted that with the publication in 1709 of the hitherto secret absolutist constitution, the ‘Royal Law’ of 1665, the contractual foundations for the king’s sovereignty became evident and thus presumably boosted the interest in natural law theories, and Holberg’s work was the first major one in the vernacular to capture this favourable wind.<sup>17</sup> In the early years of the century, Holberg’s work on natural law thus fitted into, and probably strengthened, those aspects of higher education that were of particular social and political relevance. It is precisely this role that he claims for his work in its Preface. Similar stories of the local adaptation of modern natural law can be told about most countries in Protestant Europe, as well as their overseas territories from the late seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, a trend that was mirrored in many places in Catholic Europe.<sup>18</sup>

### What natural law?

What were the features that made natural law and the associated law of nations so popular during this period?<sup>19</sup> First of all, it was perceived as a modern subject, one that was being shaped by and for the modern state and the European system of states. Natural law had of course been an important feature of medieval thought, but there it was conceived within the framework of Christian metaphysics. What early-modern Europeans saw as decisively new in the natural law that began with Hugo Grotius’s *De iure belli ac pacis* (1625) was that it was developed as a self-contained subject aimed at understanding humanity’s earthly social life by empirical, including historical, means and with a minimum of religious metaphysics, or at least clearly distinguished from revealed theology. This did not mean that



Grotius and those who followed him were irreligious, to the contrary, they were often people who tried to secure a space for religious life. But they tried to do so by separating confessional religion from politics, theology from natural law, and thus contributed significantly to the compartmentalization of life that has come to be seen as typical of modernity. By setting natural law, divine positive law (Scripture) and secular positive law alongside each other as possible authorities in humanity's attempts to live in peace, the Grotian natural lawyers in effect opened up for a legal pluralism, and it was not least this feature that made the new natural law profoundly different from scholastic doctrine by not seeking to reduce one form of law to another. This left the relationship between the different forms of law highly ambiguous and contested between rival claimants to moral and political authority, namely theologians, lawyers and philosophers. The transformation that Grotius had started was resisted by the theological establishments in different ways from one place to another, and the history of modern natural law is centrally the record of these contests for intellectual and communal, including political, authority. It is the history of parochial usage of ostensibly universal ideas. Holberg's constant weaving together of natural law, Roman law, divine positive law and the laws of Denmark and Norway is a striking example of this pluralism and the associated oscillation between the general and the particular.

Closely associated with the bracketing of religion from politics was another feature that was seen as novel, namely, the method of reasoning (or of 'proof') in the new natural law. By this was meant the manner of gathering evidence about human nature as the supposed foundation of natural law. The method, which owed a great deal to Cicero, combined two different approaches, which Grotius called *a priori* and *a posteriori*.<sup>20</sup> The former consisted of deductions from self-evident principles of human nature centering on the basic principle of sociability and its implications. The latter was the historical, anthropological, demographical and other empirical records of concrete human life in time and space. Grotius used both methods and considered the *a priori* the most decisive, the *a posteriori* the most popular in proving natural law. This two-pronged method left a deep ambiguity not only in Grotius's own work, but in the whole of the tradition of natural law that looked to his work as its founding and defining moment.

The *a posteriori* method was the least problematic, though it may be the most surprising to us, since we now think of natural law as inherently abstract and certainly not based on historical and other empirical evidence. It is, however, very important for our understanding of early-modern Protestant natural law, for it explains why this natural law incorporated so much historical material, *topoi* from classical literature as well as 'cases' from later politics and law. When Holberg expounded extensively upon Danish, Norwegian or other positive law, he was not arbitrarily pandering to a local audience; he was employing a recognized general method to a specific purpose. It was the accumulation of extensive empirical material



as evidence of humanity's social life that made these natural law texts into resources for legal argument as well as academic lectures.

More problematic was the legacy of the method that Grotius called a priori. Schematically its history in natural law can be divided into three paths, and we have to place Holberg in this scheme. In one form the a priori method was a metaphysical theory of human nature, according to which the mind, when properly trained as a pure intellect, had access to a higher law of absolute validity, the *lex æterna*, which was the foundation for natural law. This was a line of argument derived from scholasticism, which Grotius in passages preserved in vague form, and which in philosophy was adopted by the 'Christian' natural law mentioned earlier and refined by the great neo-scholastics, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff. It was also, however, the dominant mode in orthodox Lutheran theology and thus prevalent in the faculties of theology and in university consistories in the Lutheran world. Though with a great many variations, the core of this philosophical theology was the assertion that only a specially trained mind could achieve insight into the source of natural law. What divided the theologians and the metaphysicians was the question of what kind of training was necessary, for it was on this basis that the respective practitioners claimed a distinct intellectual and civil authority. Variants of the orthodox theology were dominant also in Denmark-Norway during the late seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries, a distinguished example early in this period being the Court Preacher Hector Gottfried Masius (1653–1709), a late one the eventual Bishop of Trondheim Johan Ernst Gunnerus, 1758–73.<sup>21</sup> Also Wolffian metaphysics arrived, but too late to bother Holberg.

Grotius' theory was meant to demonstrate that the elementary principles of natural law constitute an objective moral structure independent of any political authority, for instance on the open sea or in other occurrences of the state of nature. By supplying a minimal morality centering on the protection of subjective rights to secure sociability, it rejected classical scepticism.<sup>22</sup> However, in the eyes of a series of natural lawyers, led by Pufendorf, Grotius had paid far too high a price for this, especially with his assumption of an inherent sociability in human nature. Similarly, Pufendorf denied the spiritual sociability assumed by the orthodox theologians, for such metaphysical insight was not humanly possible. For Pufendorf sociability was rather something demanded by the failures of human nature and the uncertainty of life, and he saw this demand as the basic law of nature, the effectivity of which again demanded subjection to authority. In theological terms, Pufendorf and his main disciple, Christian Thomasius, appealed to forms of Lutheranism that stressed the permanent effect of original sin on human life, and there is evidence that in their personal beliefs they had much in common with pietism. However, in their philosophy they were sharply opposed to pietism with its claims to individual moral authority based on spiritual insight, when this was being propagated as a social and political



movement, though Thomasius was happy to ally himself with pietists for tactical reasons against the orthodox establishment.

### Holberg's natural law

When we situate Holberg's natural law work in the intellectual triangle of orthodox Lutheranism, Pufendorfian minimalism and vague natural sociability theory, we find it firmly in Pufendorf's corner – on the whole. The qualification is important, for on certain issues Holberg simply lets apparently opposing views stand side by side, as we will see. In general, he was clearly against Lutheran and all other clerical authoritarianism, but concerning Pufendorf his attitude is not always so clear. The difference between Pufendorf's command theory of socializing and the idea that sociability is 'natural' was often blurred by Holberg, as, indeed, occasionally by Pufendorf himself. This is hardly surprising, for the line between claiming that sociability is behaviour prescribed by natural law and that it is a natural quality with which humanity is imbued can be difficult to maintain. There is always a temptation to issue human nature with an *ad hoc* quality, an inherent moral ability, if only for polemical purposes, such as defence against accusations of Hobbesian immorality. One of the occasions in the *Law of Nature* where Holberg falls spectacularly for this temptation is precisely in a rejection of Hobbes's core idea that there is no justice in the state of nature, against which Holberg asserts that it applies universally that you must not do to another what you will not should be done to you.<sup>23</sup> In other words, he takes 'the golden rule' to be a fundamental moral principle, whereas Pufendorf, on whom he leans also here, saw it as a pedagogic device for practical learning.<sup>24</sup> As we shall see, the attraction of such ideas of a natural morality crops up in other places of the *Law of Nature*, and as is shown in chapter 4 below, it is a theme that comes to play an ever greater role in his writings. Nevertheless, and despite all conflicts, Holberg's *Law of Nature* is basically Pufendorfian, and it is telling that he follows Pufendorf in suggesting that natural sociability is effective among bees but not among humans who have free will and therefore need discipline.

Pufendorf set his natural law within a simple metaphysical structure, according to which the world consists of two kinds of 'entities', the natural or physical which are subject to causation, and the moral which comprise anything that directly or indirectly derive from human volition, in effect what we would call the social and cultural world. As mentioned, Holberg makes no reference to this aspect of Pufendorf's theory, partly because of his aversion to metaphysics, partly because of his intended audience in that work. It is, however, quite clear that he labours within this general dichotomy of nature and culture, or convention, not only in natural law but throughout his writings. One of the final occasions is his rejection of Montesquieu's climate theory of morals and politics.<sup>25</sup> But here we pursue the matter through the way he structures his natural law along the general



lines of Pufendorf, beginning with the elementary anthropology that is a presupposition for a natural law theory.

Humans are different from the rest of the animal creation by having a rational but fallible intellect and a free will. Since there is no such thing as a natural morality to correct our understanding and guide our choices, i.e. no natural orderliness and peace, humanity has to institute one by itself, and the basic natural law consists in this insight, the indispensable need to be sociable. To be sociable means first of all to be a person, i.e. to be and be seen to be subject to natural law, and this entails a series of duties to oneself concerning self-maintenance and self-development; secondly, to treat others as if they are equally persons in this sense, which entails a complicated web of duties to others. Such social intercourse requires agreements, or contracts, which again presuppose the use of a common language.<sup>26</sup>

Turning to the non-human world, we learn that it has moral relevance only through its relationship to humanity. Since the social life that is mandated by the law of nature would be impossible if life as such was not sustainable, God, as the author of natural law, 'has empowered man' (147) to use the non-human animals as necessary for food, clothing, carriage, etc. The natural world in which man and beast live was 'given' to humanity in negative community, meaning that there is no 'natural' ownership; agreements are needed to institute individual property, and Holberg takes these agreements to be to the effect that first occupation should justify a claim to property. However, property can be transferred by contract, which implies conventions about the value of goods and about the conclusion, fulfilment and interpretation of contracts.

Those are the main subjects in the first part (Book I) of Holberg's Pufendorffian outline of natural law. It is a kind of conceptual analysis to show what it means that morality and social institutions are not natural but instituted by convention. The core concept is that of the duties imposed upon humanity by the basic natural law, where 'duties' means the endless variety of offices or roles that people adopt in order to make social life possible. It is a typology that has much in common with traditional Lutheran conceptions. Each person has duties to self, to God and to others, where the duty to acknowledge the god of natural religion in fact is an aspect of our duty to develop and maintain ourselves as human agents.<sup>27</sup> Duties to others are divided into those of the family and household and those of civil society. The whole scheme is an elaborate demonstration that the moral and social life of humanity is a network of conventions or institutions. This became a basic theme that ran through a great deal of Holberg's work, so that we may say that the metaphysics that he never articulated was the presupposition for many of the most striking features of his work. I return to these features at the end of the chapter, and they are extensively discussed in the Introduction and in other chapters: Holberg's habitual floating of the authorial identities behind his works, his theory and practice as a playwright, his



'dialectic' approach to moral and social criticism, his ambivalence in matters of religion, his variations on the theme of his own identity.

The first part, Book I, of the Pufendorf-Holberg analysis did not deal with authority. It proceeded on the abstract assumption of a very basic equality among people, namely, that everyone is a person subject to natural law and to nothing else (irrespective of how unequal in all other respects). It is a state of nature in the sense of a pre-political condition without political sovereignty. At the same time, most of the topics are richly illustrated with historical cases, thus suggesting that real life in some degree can and does approximate to one or another of the 'ideal types' analyzed here. This is put into relief by the way in which Holberg concludes Book I, with a chapter that outlines the means available to settle disputes in a pre-civil society. Here he has a field day showing how early Danish and Norwegian conflict resolution had several of the features that one would expect in this 'state of nature'.

If Book I of the work is about the conventions that are necessary to institute sociability in all its many forms, Book II is about the authority that is needed for the maintenance of the social institutions. When the reader has understood both, he or she knows what it means to be under an obligation to natural law. Like nearly all the modern natural lawyers, Holberg divided social authority into two broad categories, pre-political and political and saw the distinguishing feature to be the absoluteness and the power to maintain order in a large society that only political governance could offer. The pre-political societies were those indicated above; husband and wife, parent and child and master and servant which together made up the traditional household that was the unit of which political society was composed. Through their respective contracts all these forms of society turn humanity's natural equality into inequality, into authority by some over others. This leads Holberg to consider the motivation that people have for being party to such contracts and the rationale for enforcing them. There are thus discussions of monogamy, divorce, parental authority in the different ages of childhood, the discipline of servants, and, at great length, of the socio-political contracts and their implications. Holberg follows Pufendorf in dividing the basis for political society into three components; first, a social contract between all would-be members of a society to create a political unit with a sovereign, secondly, a decree by this body stipulating a particular form of government (monarchical, aristocratic or democratic) and thirdly, another contract authorising a person or group of persons to assume the sovereign authority in the stipulated form.

There follows a largely Pufendorffian argument for the necessity of absolute sovereignty and for monarchy as the best way of meeting this necessity. The state as a composite, artificial person with its own duties and rights is only an effective means towards sociability if these duties and rights take precedence over the duties and rights of its constituent members; it must have supreme (unrivalled) sovereignty. Under this umbrella Holberg analyses what this implies for the mutual duties of ruler and ruled and explains the



use of legislation and administration. This is an account of the condition of people who are subject to civil authority with regard to the three areas of life that in the state of nature were protected by the law of nature; our physical integrity (life and limb), our social integrity ('name and reputation') and our use of the natural world (property).

Holberg follows Pufendorf in drawing an analogy between the individual person who is subject to the law of nature and the state as an artificial person subject to the same law, which is then called the law of nations. The work is rounded off with chapters on the possibility of regulating relations between states in peace and in war by means of the law of nations. In this connection Pufendorf had suggested that since sovereignty entails territorial supremacy, we must recognize sovereignty not only in European states, but also in American tribes, and this is a point pursued vigorously by Holberg, as we will see below.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout this comprehensive system of morals and politics and of private and public law, Holberg included significant amounts of material from Danish and Norwegian law and legal practice, Roman law, the *ius gentium* and occasionally other European law. It was a thorough domestication of Pufendorf for the specific Danish purposes that we indicated earlier. But although Holberg's aims were mainly practical ones in politics, law and popular enlightenment, and although he avoided explicit use of Pufendorf's metaphysical starting point, his theoretical commitments nevertheless show in the detail of his arguments. In the following we will see how he was drawn in two opposing directions by the needs of moral and political polemics, on the one hand towards a sharp limitation of the Pufendorffian conception of morals as purely cultural or conventional; on the other towards an equally sharp rejection of rights as natural.

### **Marriage problems: Thomasius**

Like Pufendorf, Holberg quite frequently invoked God's revealed word as an authority alongside or as alternative to natural law, and he did so without comment of a theoretical nature, let alone a systematic discussion of the two different kinds of law. This may surprise modern readers who are likely to take 'secular' natural law to exclude any place for divine law, but in fact pluralism in these matters was a distinctive possibility in the Grotian revolution in legal thinking, as we mentioned earlier. By the time Holberg wrote, this possibility had been taken up in a systematic way by one of the authors he invoked, Thomasius. Although in so many ways Pufendorf's major disciple, Thomasius deviated from the master by explicitly elevating divine positive law to parity with natural law.<sup>29</sup> Both were given by God to repair upon man's completely fallen nature in order to complement each other in the various departments of sin, but the law of nature was to be accessed by 'reason', the other by the methods of ordinary public jurisprudence. The point was that neither of God's laws was the proper province of the theologians, but



rather of secular philosophers and lawyers. This striking doctrine was put forward in Thomasius's first major work on natural law, the *Institutiones jurisprudentiæ divinæ* (1688). It was the only work by the German thinker that Holberg referred to, yet there is no trace of Thomasius's restructuring of Pufendorf in the Danish work, only the acknowledged or unacknowledged adoption of particular points collected somewhat indiscriminately from Thomasius's separate discussions of natural law, divine positive law and secular positive law. However, one of these particular issues discloses a fundamental disagreement in the theory of marriage. Already in the first edition of Holberg's *Law of Nature* several of the points relating to marriage were critical of Thomasius, ending with the remark that his doctrine on marriage is 'peculiar' (315). However, in the second edition of the work Holberg adds a fierce polemic over the question of prohibited degrees in marriage, and this brings out his distance to the Halle philosopher.

The basic Pufendorfan idea that all 'moral entities', all social relations, arise directly or indirectly from human activity was put to perhaps its most severe test over the moral standing of gender relations. Then as now people were particularly prone to think of certain forms of behaviour in this aspect of life as 'natural' in the sense of inherently right or wrong, but Pufendorf began and Thomasius completed a remarkable deconstruction of such ideas. Thomasius came to the conclusion that natural law did not specify *any* particular gender relations among humanity, they were all malleable and open to regulation by positive law, divine or secular. Holberg accepted many of Thomasius's conclusions, but he rejected all the really radical ones, namely extra marital sex, 'Amazonian' liaisons purely for procreation, contractually time-limited marriage, marriage without cohabitation, and male polygamy. On the points where he did agree with Thomasius that natural law left matters to human choice, he was quick to insist on the need for moral and legal regulation of other sorts (e.g. of female polygamy and divorce). In gender matters of this kind Holberg is thus completely inconsistent with his argument for gender equality in social relations such as education and career, where his line is that differences are socially created and hence can be socially amended as necessary or desirable.

Holberg's differences with Thomasius were brought to a high point over the question of marriage between close relations. This was a central issue in early modern natural law, often accentuated by the marital problems of royalty and nobility, and it goes to the very core of the new natural law ideas. Parentage was a matter of natural facts and could only become a moral matter, namely a matter of the natural law on marriage, if it could be argued that certain forms of parenthood or childhood were incompatible with the basic law about seeking peace by living sociably. Holberg agreed with Pufendorf and Thomasius that this could not be shown for marriage of collateral relatives (siblings, cousins, etc.), but the hard question was vertical consanguinity (parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, etc.). Pufendorf admitted that this was extremely difficult to show, but he tried



the following argument. Sexual relations between parent and child entailed an immodesty that undermined our humanity in the sense of reducing us to animality and thus risking our status as persons capable of adopting the basic law of nature. Pufendorf himself did not seem entirely persuaded by this argument, but thought that this was the best he could do,<sup>30</sup> and Holberg vaguely took the same line. Thomasius, however, made short thrift with it, arguing that it depended entirely on the circumstances whether such marriages ran counter to moral capability, and concluded that they were not prohibited by natural law, only by divine positive law.

Holberg's outrage at this idea was fully brought out when it was presented in a dissertation by another young Danish author, Andreas Hojer.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to Holberg, Hojer had paid more than a courtesy visit to the Thomasians in Halle and had actually studied there. So not only was he familiar with Thomasius's original natural law doctrine in the *Institutiones*, but also with its revision in the *Fundamenta juris naturæ et gentium* (1705). Holberg never mentions the latter work, but he would have become aware of at least some its basic arguments through Hojer's dissertation.<sup>32</sup> One can see why the new turn that Thomasius had given his doctrine would provoke an old-fashioned and somewhat conservative Pufendorfan, such as Holberg, even more than the original argument. In a revision too complicated to explain here, Thomasius had replaced natural law as a remedy for humanity's moral incapacity (sinfulness) with a social and individual pedagogy for how to manage the passions – now understood in Epicurean terms – so that social life was made possible. This was a moral balancing act at three levels, known as the virtues of justice (control by law and the fear of force), decorum (control by social pressure) and *honestum* (complete self-control through personal wisdom). In this scheme, the moral and social issues previously relegated to divine or secular positive law were primarily discussed as matters for the virtues of decorum and *honestum*, with the question of positive law enforcement occasionally an additional concern. This was also the way in which the passions leading to incest were dealt with by Thomasius – and by Andreas Hojer.

Holberg replied to Hojer in his own brief 'dissertation on consanguineous marriages in the direct line forbidden by natural law' in the same year as Hojer's dissertation and then repeated the core of his objections in the second edition of *Law of Nature*.<sup>33</sup> Often set aside as little more than a rhetorical spat between two young rivals for preferment in the domestic academic duckpond, both pamphlets do in fact present substantial arguments, and the ferocity of the language in Holberg's response was not unusual for the genre despite its academic formality. In fact, the polemical tirade was the most 'Thomasian' feature that Holberg embraced. Holberg's great distance from Thomasius is shown by his remarkable pronouncement that the divine positive law's treatment of marriage was a matter that he was happy to leave to the court (*forum*) of the theologians.<sup>34</sup> His more theoretical case against the radicalism of Thomasius, new and old, consisted partly in a restatement



of Pufendorf's above-mentioned (dubious) argument about a possible natural law prohibition on incestuous marriages, partly in a turn towards a substantial 'naturalism' that is a complete lapse from his Pufendorffian principles. By this I mean that Holberg used 'nature' and 'the natural' as normative concepts in themselves, which led him into well-known circular arguments. For instance, he rejected empirical evidence against the naturalness of shame about incest by maintaining that societies that do not have such shame by that very token are immoral and hence do not count.

He felt so strongly about this matter that he maintained the same standpoint in practical legal advice. As mentioned earlier, the professors in the Consistory of the University of Copenhagen were assessors in cases of family law, and among the preserved vota by Holberg there is one in which he says that an application from a man who wants permission to marry his step-father's former wife is against natural reverence, the practice of nations and the law of Denmark. He adds that a dispensation from the law would 'confound that which is *legitimum* with that which is *honestum et decorum*'. In other words, he objects precisely to the possibility that the Thomasian scheme of virtues might be applied to the case. Holberg's conservatism in matrimonial matters was thus not simply the expression of a quirky personality, but derived directly from his theoretical considerations beginning with his earliest publication on the matter.<sup>35</sup>

In sum, the issue of marriage shows that there were limits to Holberg's acceptance of the theory of moral and social relations as conventions. Although in general this was the Pufendorffian framework within which he himself worked, it became unacceptable when radicalized by Thomasius to account for the moral-legal status of certain gender relations. It is telling that exactly in this connection, Holberg invoked Grotius, who, as mentioned earlier, also retained elements of the traditional, classical idea of a natural morality. However, when we turn to other areas of natural law, such as *rights*, and other opponents, such as Jean Barbeyrac, Holberg takes on a very different appearance.

### The problem with natural rights: Jean Barbeyrac

The Huguenot refugee Jean Barbeyrac was mainly known, also to Holberg, for his French translations of Pufendorf's *De jure* and *De officio* and Grotius's *De iure belli*.<sup>36</sup> His voluminous commentaries on these works constituted a substantial contribution to natural law theory in their own right, and Barbeyrac's presentation of the major theorists became one of the most influential factors in the development of natural law in the Enlightenment.<sup>37</sup> It is, therefore, of particular interest to see how thinkers, such as Holberg, in the early phase of this period reacted to Barbeyrac. For Holberg, Barbeyrac was primarily a dangerous Calvinist who had to be countered on several of the most central issues in political theory, all of them centering on the idea of rights.



Again, we have to remind ourselves of the conceptual world in which Holberg operated, namely that of Pufendorf. In the Pufendorbian scheme of things the concept of natural rights was strictly speaking a contradiction in terms. Any claim to a right and any recognition of it would be human interferences in nature, they would be 'moral entities.' Rights can only arise as implications of law, and a very small number of primitive rights may be called 'natural' because they are derived from the most elementary duties imposed by the basic law of nature. But the idea of rights as inherent in a person as such was considered a Calvinist misconception, according to which rights were the assertion of individual autonomy in the name of conscience as the voice of God in man. Rights were seen as yet another metaphysical construction of natural or essential morality. Holberg showed no interest in these theoretical issues and clearly took it for granted that rights are derived from law or arise from contracts.<sup>38</sup> But he showed his Pufendorbian hand in his rejection of particular applications of the idea of natural rights.<sup>39</sup>

The first case concerns the basis for private property. As mentioned earlier, Holberg restated Pufendorf's theory that the natural world was given humanity in negative community, whereas private property was instituted by conventions to the effect that first occupation gave original right in things. Our interest here is that Holberg took up Barbeyrac's rejection of Pufendorf's idea of the origins of private property and especially Barbeyrac's invocation of John Locke to this purpose. This is the only appearance of Locke in Holberg's *Law of Nature*, and the work he mentioned was the French translation of the *Second Treatise of Government*, which was Barbeyrac's reference. While respectful of Locke, Holberg's rejection was complete. According to his understanding of Locke, the right to private property was a direct grant from God conditional upon need and merit, but this, Holberg found, was a recipe for anarchy, for who had an objective criterion for need and desert (152–156)?

Going from the state of nature to the first form of society, the family, we find a different critical attitude to rights. Holberg outlined Pufendorf's theory of the grounds for parental authority over their children, namely, first, the natural-law command to care for the offspring (an important form of sociability) and, secondly, the implicit contractual agreement of the children to be taken care of (323–24). He mentioned how Pufendorf rejected the idea – ascribed to Grotius – that the right to parental authority stems from the breeding of the children, Pufendorf's criticism being that the natural process by itself establishes no moral relation. This led Holberg to consider Barbeyrac's suggestion that the authority arises from the breeding and the care combined, because the sexual congress is also a signal – a speech act, as it were – that says that the couple take responsibility for the outcome of their exertions. This, said Holberg, is a mistake, for while the act may institute an obligation between the parents, it establishes nothing with relation to the child (presumably he meant neither a duty to obey nor a right to be



taken care of). So also in this case the attempt to give morality – the parental right – a hook in nature, even if a feeble one, was rejected.

Much more important is the case of civil society and the right of resistance. The context is a chapter in which Holberg set out several of the Pufendorbian criteria for proper sovereignty, namely that it must be supreme, unaccountable and above the law. He then confronted the enemy. First, he recited Grotius's rejection of the Calvinist doctrine of the right to resistance that is lodged in the lower magistrates (360–361).<sup>40</sup> He then turned to Barbeyrac with a scathing rejection of the Huguenot's statement of people's right of resistance if they are severely threatened into acting against their conscience. In Holberg's opinion, this would tend to undermine sovereign authority ('nothing goes a ruler more to the heart than to hear subjects reasoning about his absolute commands'), it would threaten disagreement and chaos, it would presume that subjects know better than the ruler, and it would lead to death for the rebels and misery for their relatives. Better to 'obey blindly' or, *in extremis*, suffer death.

The underlying idea is, of course, that the rationale for the state is protection against domestic and external violence, and that absolute sovereignty is the price to be paid. Specifically, the state is not a structure of normative ethical relations, such as a system of natural rights. This is reflected in another way, namely the view of punishment. This is an institution purely aimed at maintaining social peace and secure its fruits, not at moral restitution.<sup>41</sup> As a consequence, we do not for example have a duty to turn ourselves in if we have committed a crime. Also this had been misunderstood by Barbeyrac, according to Holberg, for he thought that since the civil authority has a right to punish as part of its sovereignty, it follows necessarily that those who are guilty and subject to punishment have a duty to admit their guilt.<sup>42</sup> But this assumes that there is a morally right state of affairs between the criminal and his or her victim which punishment can re-establish, whereas the proper aim of punishment is to deter further crime. This argument acquires a religious dimension when Holberg considers the death penalty. The common and orthodox justification of capital punishment was that the imminence of death would elicit the criminal's atonement with God, but, Holberg objects, it is not possible that the condemned will act freely on the scaffold, so no proper moral relationship is in fact established by such punishment. Its only justification is deterrence.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, we turn to the law of nations, more especially the right of war (424–425). States have a right to just war, which is defined as war to protect against injury past, present or future. This had been used by Spain, says Holberg, to justify their conquests in America, for the indigenous people were inflicting serious injury by practising cannibalism. Following Pufendorf, Holberg considers this justification spurious, for the injury was not inflicted on the Spaniards or anyone close to them; it was a purely domestic injury.<sup>44</sup> Holberg had outlined exactly the same argument for the individual in the state of nature. Our natural-law duty to others does include that we protect



those close to us against injury, but not people outside of our ordinary reach, not the anonymous other (87). Again Barbeyrac is hauled up as the one who has not understood these matters. As Holberg read him, Barbeyrac apparently thought that restitution of morals or even enforcement of religious faith can justify war, but this is like breaking nine commandments in order to keep the tenth, meaning, it is like contravening the law of nature about peace in order to establish peace, but peace understood as some kind moral state of affairs, whereas peace in the proper Pufendorfian sense is simply abstention from violence.

In sum, Holberg was contending with two forms of natural law theory that, at the time, were considered radical. On one side was Thomasius's extreme version of the conventionalist view of the moral and social world that Pufendorf had first worked out. On the other was the theory of inherent or natural rights that Holberg found in Calvinist resistance theory and its modern re-formulation by Locke that had been spread across Europe by Barbeyrac. The former was dangerous to domestic society and thus to social morality, the other was a threat to absolute sovereignty, such as the Danish-Norwegian monarchy, and therefore to public peace at home and security abroad. The tensions arising from these two critical encounters were never resolved in Holberg's work, and this leads us to ask, what became of such a work?

### The fate of Holberg's natural law work

As we mentioned, the work sold well enough to attract several editions, yet it was not Holberg's work that was associated with the University of Copenhagen's new law degree in 1736. It was, of all things, the already mentioned translation of Pufendorf's textbook, the *De officio*. We have to ask why this might have been done when Holberg's very Pufendorfian work was already available? It was in fact not simply Pufendorf's text that was translated, it was Barbeyrac's edition of it with most of his extensive notes. Pufendorf's original work, although from a previous generation, was clearly superior to Holberg's, and with Barbeyrac's additions it had become much more modern. However, there were also personal and ideological factors in the translation of Pufendorf. The man behind it was Holberg's old nemesis, Andreas Hojer, who was now occupying a new, second professorship of law, devoted to natural law. This was part of a reform of the University with new statutes in 1732 that led up to the establishment of the two-tiered formal degree in law in 1736.<sup>45</sup> In a remarkable dissertation setting out his programme for the new law curriculum, *Idea of a Danish Jurist*, Hojer expressed the strong desirability of a Danish translation of Pufendorf with Barbeyrac's commentary, and one of Hojer's protégés readily obliged.<sup>46</sup>

The translation and Hojer's dissertation – which strikingly avoided all mention of Holberg – serve further to put Holberg's work into proper perspective. Barbeyrac's Pufendorf-edition that Hojer so much admired



was considered so dangerous by the Danish censor that three of the most incendiary annotations had been expurgated in the translation, as the translator explains in his Preface.<sup>47</sup> The three notes in question promoted ideas that Holberg would have found as objectionable as the censor, namely the ultimate right of self-defence against the sovereign, the subjection of the sovereign to the 'Loix Fondamentales de l'Etat' and the divisibility of governmental authority ('mixed government').<sup>48</sup> As for Hojer's dissertation, it is an up-to-date programme of study very much in the vein of Thomasius, including the fact that it was instantly translated into the vernacular as was the case with Thomasius's corresponding work.<sup>49</sup> It outlines an ambitious programme of interdisciplinary study for the budding jurist and gives a comprehensive overview of the international natural law literature.

Using Hojer's programme as an appropriate contemporary measure for Holberg's work, one has to conclude that it was clearly out of touch with the development of its subject. Although Holberg revised the work in 1728 and 1734, the selection of new material appears somewhat haphazard, and some of it seems simply to be the result of Holberg's predilection for anecdotal sidelines, so that several passages are less than orderly in their presentation. What is more, apart from the interchanges with Barbeyrac and the somewhat indirect reflection of the later Thomasius, there is no attention to the more recent proliferation of relevant literature.<sup>50</sup>

In one perspective the main interest of the work might be said to be that it was in fact relatively poor of its kind and yet had a comparatively long life. This may be taken as evidence of how pervasive the need for basic knowledge of natural law was. Despite the new 'Latin', i.e. properly academic, degree in law, the practice of law continued for much of the century to be dominated by those with no degree or with only the lower, purely Danish degree, which, however, demanded elementary natural law. For this audience, the incorporation of domestic legal material in the natural-law system was likely to be more useful than the metaphysics which Holberg cut out or the modern literature which he ignored. Thus, his originally stated strategy in the composition of the work was successful.

But whatever the reasons for its continued popularity – and one should not forget Holberg as a marketing brand, even then – the first appearance of his *Law of Nature*, despite its limitations, was certainly an important factor in the early establishment of a distinctive intellectual culture in Denmark that one might perhaps describe as a broadly Pufendorfian Enlightenment. However, as far as natural law as an academic discipline with a theoretical foundation was concerned, it was others who continued to develop this culture and to maintain it against alternatives of very different philosophical and theological outlook, some of which might also be seen as 'enlightened'. And as far as Holberg is concerned, he had the variety of talents to flourish in several other genres, and he did so with such success that he overshadowed his contemporaries, with the paradoxical result that the meaning and role of his own starting point in natural law has been poorly understood.



## Notes

- 1 *Introduction til Naturens og Folkerettens Kundskab* (Copenhagen: 1716; 3rd ed. 1734). In some copies of the first edition the title begins *Moralske Kierne, eller Introduction . . .* (The Core of Morality, or Introduction . . .). The two title pages also differ concerning the year of publication, 1715 or 1716, but the latter seems correct. All page references in the present text are to the third edition, 1734, unless otherwise indicated. The specific names of the ‘Prominent Jurists’ were dropped from the title page after the first edition.
- 2 Literature on Holberg’s natural law is limited. The main work is Kåre Foss, *Ludvig Holbergs naturrett på idéhistorisk bakgrunn* (Oslo: 1943), which is old-fashioned Ideengeschichte and premised on the misconception that there is a continuous natural law tradition from the ancient Greeks to Holberg and beyond. A recent anthology provides a range of interdisciplinary approaches to Holberg’s natural law, *Ludvig Holbergs naturrett*, ed. E. Vinje and J. M. Sejersted (Oslo: 2012). Sören Koch, ‘En naturlig rettsorden for det dansk-norske kongeriket. En rettshistorisk analyse av Ludvig Holbergs lærebok i natur- og folkerett’ (PhD, University of Bergen, 2015) is a comprehensive and detailed legal-historical analysis whose publication is a desideratum.
- 3 See Horst Denzer, *Moralphilosophie und Naturrecht bei Samuel Pufendorf. Eine geistes- und wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Geburt des Naturrechts aus der Praktischen Philosophie* (Munich: 1972), 360–362, 364–366; Klaus Luig, ‘Zur Verbreitung des Naturrechts in Europa’, *Tidjschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 40 (1972): 539–557.
- 4 For a brief overview of Pufendorf’s career and extensive work, see Michael Seidler, ‘Pufendorf’s Moral and Political Philosophy’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/pufendorf-moral/> (accessed 14.6.2016).
- 5 Cf. Introduction, Part 2.
- 6 The professors who were members of the Consistory of the University were *ex officio* assessors in the court of the Diocese of Zealand, in effect the family court.
- 7 Ditlev Tamm, ‘The Danish code of 1683. An early European code in international context’, in Tamm, *The History of Danish Law. Selected Articles and Bibliography* (Copenhagen: 2011), 69–83.
- 8 See Thøger Nielsen, *Studier over ældre dansk Formueretspraksis. Et Bidrag til dansk Privatrets Historie i Tiden efter Chr. D. V’s Danske Lov* (Copenhagen: 1951) 15–33; Ole Fenger, *Romerret i Norden* (Copenhagen: 1977) 134–144.
- 9 See Michael Stolleis, *Geschichte des öffentlichen Rechts in Deutschland*, I: 1600–1800 (Munich: 1988), Ch. 6.
- 10 *Ad virum perillustrem* (First Autobiographical Letter) (Copenhagen: 1728), 119–120, trans. in *Memoirs of Lewis Holberg* (London: 1827) 85–86.
- 11 See Thøger Nielsen, *Uddrag af Højesterets Voteringsprotokoller. Retspraksis paa Formuerettens Omraade i det 18. Aarhundrede* (Copenhagen: 1951).
- 12 Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, ‘Scandinavia’, in *European Political Thought 1450–1700. Religion, Law and Philosophy*, ed. H. A. Lloyd, G. Burgess, S. Hodson (New Haven, CN: 2007) 313–315.
- 13 Just as it was part of the curriculum of Sorø Academy when this was re-established in 1747; Helle Vogt, ‘Den juridiske undervisning på det andet ridderlige akademi i Sorø’, *Tidsskrift for Rettsvitenskap* 120 (2007): 579–613.
- 14 Ditlev Tamm et al., *Juraen på Københavns Universitet, 1479–2005* (Copenhagen: 2005) 59–70.
- 15 For the beginnings of a complete revision of the understanding of the academic natural-law culture in Denmark in the 1690s and the first decades of the



- eighteenth century, see Mads L. Jensen, 'Contests about natural law in early Enlightenment Copenhagen', *History of European Ideas* 42 (2016): forthcoming. Concerning 'Christian' natural law, see in particular Hans-Peter Schneider, *Justitia universalis: Quellenstudien zur Geschichte des 'Christlichen Naturrechts' bei Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* (Frankfurt am Main: 1967).
- 16 Reitzer's library was one of several significant collections in Copenhagen. For a study of their role in international freethinking circles, see Martin Mulsow, 'Freethinking in early eighteenth-century Protestant Germany: Peter Friedrich Arpe and the *Traité des trois imposteurs*', in *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Dordrecht: 1996) 204–209. Several in the Copenhagen circle clearly were in touch with an Enlightenment world very different from that of Holberg.
  - 17 Olden-Jørgensen, 'Scandinavia', 330–331.
  - 18 Knud Haakonssen, 'Enlightenment and the ubiquity of natural law', in *Time in the Age of Enlightenment* (13th Inter. Congress for Eighteenth-Century Studies), ed. W. Schmale (Bochum: 2012), 45–57.
  - 19 For a fuller survey, see Knud Haakonssen, 'Early-modern natural law theories', in *Cambridge Companion to Natural Law Jurisprudence*, ed. G. Duke, R. P. George (Cambridge: forthcoming 2017).
  - 20 Cf. Benjamin Straumann, *Roman Law in the State of Nature. The Classical Foundations of Hugo Grotius' Natural Law* (Cambridge: 2015), chapter 3.
  - 21 See Frank Grunert, "'Händel mit Herrn Hector Gottfried Masio.'" Zur Pragmatik des Streits in den Kontroversen mit dem Kopenhaener Hofprediger', in *Appell an das Publikum: Die öffentliche Debatte in der deutschen Aufklärung 1687–1796*, ed. Ursula Goldenbaum (Berlin: 2004), 119–174; Rolv Nøtvik Jakobsen, *Gunnerus og nordisk vitskapshistorie* (Oslo: 2015), chapter 10.
  - 22 See Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories* (Cambridge: 1979) and the criticism by Straumann, *Roman Law*.
  - 23 *Natur- og Folkeretten*, I, 28. Pufendorf at this point of his argument assumed that people in this state of nature (Pufendorf operated with several such states) had undertaken the obligation to the law of nature – i.e. to strive to keep the peace – so that recognition of justice (rights) was a means to this end; *De jure naturae* I.7.13.
  - 24 *De jure naturae* II.3.13, where Pufendorf even uses Hobbes in support of seeing the golden rule as a heuristic device! In the corresponding part of his text, Holberg ignores this point.
  - 25 See the Introduction, 14, and chapter 5, 105–106.
  - 26 Cf. T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: 2000) 83–95.
  - 27 Holberg follows Pufendorf's *De jure naturae* in not allocating a separate chapter to duties to God and in treating them briefly under duties to oneself. In his textbook, *De officio hominis et civis*, Pufendorf gave the subject a brief chapter. As so often on such issues, Holberg's motivation is a matter of guesswork. In his work as a whole, Holberg operates with a much more nuanced idea of divinity; see chapter 4.
  - 28 See Kristoffer Schmidt, 'Holbergs naturretslige og historiske syn på spaniernes kolonisering af Amerika', in *Ludvig Holbergs naturrett*, ed. Vinje and Sejersted, 140–158, and 105 below.
  - 29 In Pufendorf the relationship between God's natural and His positive law is a matter of scholarly debate.
  - 30 Pufendorf preceded it by quoting several pages from the Dutch natural lawyer Lambert van Velthuysen to the effect that there was no natural law argument against such marriages, adding that these arguments are not at all to be scorned; *De jure naturae* VI.1.31.



- 31 *Dissertatio de nuptiis propinquorum* (Copenhagen: 1719).
- 32 The editor of the most common modern edition of Holberg's *Law of Nature* calls the *Fundamenta* Thomasius's main work, Ludvig Holberg, *Værker*, 12 vols., ed. F. J. Billeskov Jansen (Copenhagen: 1969–71) I, 48. It was in fact constructed as a relatively short but very important commentary on his earlier major treatise.
- 33 *Dissertatio juridica de nuptiis propinquorum in linea recta jure naturali prohibitis* (Rostock [in fact Copenhagen]: 1719). *Law of Nature*, 269–271.
- 34 Holberg, *Dissertatio juridica*, 2. I am indebted to Mads Jensen for discussion of this point.
- 35 Eiler Nystrøm, *Holbergs egenhændige vota som universitetsprofessor* (Copenhagen: 1928) 5. In another votum he also supported the death penalty for two siblings who had committed incest, but that was purely a matter of the law of the land. No natural law issues were raised. Op. cit., 3–4.
- 36 He translated also Richard Cumberland, John Tillotson, Gerhard Noodt *et al.*, and he wrote extensive treatises on the history of the church fathers and on gaming (as part of the common discussion of adiaphora). Holberg briefly mentioned Cumberland as a prominent opponent of Hobbes, and expressed great appreciation of Barbeyrac's *Traité de la morale des peres de l'église* (Amsterdam: 1728).
- 37 Barbeyrac also wrote a history of natural law as a lengthy preface to his edition of Pufendorf's *De jure*, and it has been thought that this was the inspiration for Holberg's potted history of the subject in the preface to his own *Law of Nature*. However, the brief history was there in Holberg's first edition, while Barbeyrac is only introduced in the second edition, and there is little that points to Barbeyrac in particular as the source. It was central to eclecticism to draw on existing 'schools' of thought when composing a theory. See Introduction, Part 2.
- 38 In one brief passage he mentions the idea of right as the residue of liberty left over by law (*Law of Nature* 19–20), but he never pursues this to consider what it could possibly mean in his general theory. More particularly, he never indicates any interest in Barbeyrac's idea of a permissive law of nature to 'cover' such liberty. For this, see Sophie Bisset, 'Jean Barbeyrac's theory of permissive natural law and the foundations of property rights', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 76 (2015): 541–562.
- 39 For a very different reading of Holberg on rights, see F. J. Billeskov Jansen, 'Holberg og menneskerettighederne', in Billeskov Jansen, *Ludvig Holberg og menneskerettighederne* (Copenhagen: 1999) 23–33.
- 40 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis libri tres* [1625], ed. B. J. A. de Kanter – van Hettinga Tromp (1939), R. Feenstra and C. E. Persenaire (Aalen: 1993) I.4.6.
- 41 Cf. *Epistler* V (2), 104–105. Elsewhere, *Epistler* IV, 300–302, he acknowledges that punishment may improve criminals.
- 42 Those who see all roads as leading to Kant may not resist the temptation to discern a step towards the *right* to punishment, but they should.
- 43 See *Epistler*, V, 104–105.
- 44 Cf. note 26 above.
- 45 Cf. Tamm *et al.*, *Juraen på Københavns Universitet*, 71–83.
- 46 See Andreas Hojer, *Idea jurisconsulti Danici* (Copenhagen: 1736), I.2.11, note i. As an alternative to the Barbeyrac edition, Hojer suggested an annotated edition by Gottlieb Samuel Treuer. The Danish translator, Christian Homfred Brugman, explained his commission from Hojer in the Preface to the work, *Et Menniskenes og en Borgers Pligter efter Naturens Lov* (Copenhagen: 1742), unnumbered (last two pages of the Preface). Concerning Hojer, see Troels G. Jørgensen, *Andreas Hojer. Jurist og Historiker* (Copenhagen: 1961), and Jensen, 'Contests about natural law.'



- 47 Pufendorf, *Et Menniskenes og en Borgers Pligter*, Preface, unnumbered (last page).
- 48 Pufendorf, *Les Devoirs de l'homme et du citoyen, tels qu'ils lui sont prescrits par la loi naturelle*, trans. J. Barbeyrac, (4th ed. Amsterdam: 1718) 120–121, 330, and 340–341.
- 49 Hojer, *Forestilling på en dansk jurist . . .*, (s.l. [Copenhagen]: 1737).
- 50 Holberg's attitude may be inferred from the fact that fourteen years later, and a decade after Hojer's death, he still had to devote an epistle to a spiteful spoof on the professor's requirements for the new jurists' learning; *Epistler* III, 456–459.



## 4 Morals and religion in Holberg's essays

*Jørgen Magnus Sejersted*

During the last ten years of his life, Ludvig Holberg, now a famous author, a leading figure at the University of Copenhagen and, from 1747, a baron, spends most of his time writing essays that comment on the European intellectual debate in a personal, self-reflective and often paradoxical style. Although clearly influenced by the *Spectator* literature, Montaigne and classical authors, these essays constitute the most original part of his non-fiction, and Holberg is widely regarded as the supreme pioneer of this genre in Denmark and Norway.

The nexus of morality and religion was always at the heart of Holberg's authorship and also defines his essays. Although sympathetic to the radical ideas of his time, Holberg held on to elements of providence and revelation and claimed that religion was the necessary basis of morals and therefore a fundamental premise for society. This perspective on religion was not purely instrumental, but relied on the axiom that the same basic virtues are shared by God and man. Although he was influenced by those forms of contemporary natural law that attempted to separate state and religion and fascinated by the misanthropic Hobbesian tradition as developed by Mandeville, and although he admired the deist attitude, he held on to the moral quality of God as the defining principle of the personal moral system that he articulated in his late essays in *Moral Reflections* (1744) and *Epistles* (1748–54).

This chapter will not attempt to determine whether this makes Holberg's Enlightenment moderate, religious or conservative,<sup>1</sup> or whether it is lent a touch of radicalism by his attempts to accommodate certain radical ideas to the context of protestant absolutism. The task will rather be to analyse how he negotiates the European debate on the foundations of morals at different stages of his authorship. This has roots in his early encounter with natural law, but it is a dominant theme in the late writings on what he calls broadly moral philosophy. There is a basic continuity in his view on morals and religion, but the perspective changes as questions of moral theology and philosophy are transformed to a methodical subjectivism in the personal essays that he wrote under influence of German protestant eclecticism.



## Natural law and religion<sup>2</sup>

Holberg maintains throughout his writings that reason and religion as far as possible should be treated as compatible, but allowing the possibility of supernatural revelation, miracles and providence that are beyond but not against reason. Thus reason and revelation can and should be informed by one another – also when it comes to morals. This brings him at odds with many of the writers he admires, not only the natural law theorists Pufendorf and Thomasius, but also a writer such as the infamous radical Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), whose attempts to demonstrate the irrationality of Christendom was to be a major source of inspiration and provocation to Holberg in the essays of his later years. His attitude to Bayle was ambiguous. In his *First Autobiographical Letter* (1728) he had recollected how the students in Paris in 1714 fought over Bayle's *Dictionary*, and how he himself later, in Rome, managed to get hold of a copy for a brief spell. His first authorial reference to Bayle's work, however, occurred as late as 1735 in the *History of Denmark* volume III. From then on Bayle was a recurrent source,<sup>3</sup> and in *Epistles* he emerges as a major influence and antagonist. Holberg, like many others, doubted Bayle's intentions and saw in his works an undermining of Christianity and religion as such.

The natural law debate is the European framework for Holberg's earliest engagement with morals and religion in his modest work on natural law from 1716, a work that was reprinted in new editions throughout his life.<sup>4</sup> But Holberg also had to consider the national context of Lutheran academics in Copenhagen such as Hans Wandal (1624–75) and H.G. Masius (1653–1703), who would emphasize the relevance of protestant theology to moral philosophy, natural law and politics. Masius and the clergy of Copenhagen had been in direct confrontation with Thomasius,<sup>5</sup> and the career-minded Holberg not only had to navigate strategically when adapting modern natural law to the Danish academic context; it also seems he shared some of the local Lutheran sentiments towards the fundamental importance of religion.

In his brief definition of natural religion in *De officio hominis et civis*, Pufendorf specified that we cannot describe the divine infinite being positively in any plausible way. When we say that God is wise, just and good, these words signify only our human admiration; they do not describe God as he is in his infinity.<sup>6</sup> Holberg deviates on this important point. Although he simply leaves out the discussion on natural religion in *Law of Nature*, he clarifies repeatedly in his later authorship that it is not necessary to postulate such an abstract deity. Holberg's consistent and traditionalist view is that a deity exists that is morally good and carries some specific virtues, and that this must be the cornerstone of all moral and theological reflection. To Holberg, God's qualities as wise, just and good are the moral virtues relevant to humans in everyday life. These shared qualities of God and man are the connection between (natural or Christian) religion and morals.



There is some evidence that the issue of an a priori, religious morality becomes an ever more important issue in Holberg's text. In the third edition (1734) of *Law of Nature*, Holberg adds a paragraph against Hobbes where the importance of a *natural* morality is made clear. Hobbes, says Holberg, claims that there can be no injustice in a natural state where no contract is yet established, but this is 'an obnoxious opinion, that overthrows all morality, and the great commandment of nature, which is: You shall do unto others as you would have them do unto you'.<sup>7</sup> So it is vital for Holberg to emphasize that morals and justice (entities he will not separate) are present before any contract is established. The fundamental importance of this universal 'golden rule' prior to any societal contract, would be specified later in Holberg's essays.

### Stoicism and its shortcomings

Not only protestant morality, but also the moral philosophy of antiquity enters Holberg's discussions through the natural law perspective. In the brief historical account of moral philosophy that makes up the second part of Holberg's foreword in *Law of Nature*, he had started with Homer and the Greeks, and then mentioned the Romans Cicero and Seneca, the latter having 'written more elaborately on natural law than anybody else, and therefore can be said to surpass both Greek and Roman philosophers in this matter'.<sup>8</sup> While Holberg at first may have received Seneca through Pufendorf, from the late 1730s onwards the Roman stoic was a major inspiration to write essays.<sup>9</sup> Stoic ethics is evident in many of his favourite maxims, such as to 'know thyself', always to keep to the golden mean, and in the motto of his signet: 'Constancy', but Holberg also has his doubts and objections when it comes to stoicism.<sup>10</sup>

Holberg's critique of stoicism is part of his emerging scepticism towards any abstract system, philosophical, moral or theological, as opposed to individual experience. In his 'Preparation' for the comparison of Socrates and Epaminondas in *Lives of Heroes* from 1739, which is an essay on the virtues of a true philosopher, he discusses the dynamics between reason and passion and concludes that he himself is not a stoic, nor a philosopher, as he has never been able to control his own anger, and that passions are an inevitable human trait and should be ruled by reason not as slaves, but as free subjects.<sup>11</sup> Or in another of his metaphors: Reason is at the rudder, passion is the wind.<sup>12</sup> In consequence, the irrationality of man must be considered and accepted in moral theory. The body and the passions can neither be ignored nor fully controlled. The main point of the 'Preparation' is to redefine 'philosophy' as moderate everyday praxis, not theory.

### Third autobiographical letter

In his *Third Autobiographical Letter*, published in Latin in 1743, Holberg picks up the philosopher-debate from *Lives of Heroes* and anticipates his later essays. The biographical setting is in itself a signal of the subjective



turn towards the writer's moral attitude and cultural context rather than the philosophical subject itself. The three autobiographical letters are addressed to a 'perillustrious' gentleman and this fictive recipient reoccurs in *Epistles*. The intellectual frame of reference has now changed from Pufendorfian natural law and ancient philosophy to more recent, radical debate. Holberg refers briefly to Pierre Bayle, whom he admires for his sharp wit, but he concludes that the moderate Arminian Jean Le Clerc, a prominent authority throughout Holberg's texts, has succeeded in defending the Christian faith against Bayle's attack.

Holberg's focus in *Third Autobiographical Letter*, however, is not theory, but individual practice. He laments that such great writers as Bayle and Le Clerc are no longer around. The first is a brilliant pen, the other the most learned mind, and they are both giants, though Holberg basically disagrees with the former. However, it is not the theological subtleties of the argument that interest Holberg, who shortly thereafter concludes that he is proudly ignorant of systematic theology. He then turns his attention towards the English deists and abhors their opinions, but at the same time he admires their toleration and honest truth-seeking. What they claim seems less important than how and why they make such claims.

This *ad hominem* attitude also encompasses himself. Holberg again confronts the ideals of moral philosophy with his personal experiences of losing his temper. Humans are not made of marble or oak, so they cannot avoid their emotions, hence the stoic ideal is in fact impossible. The wooden metaphor of his argument is a subtle reference to the moral of the utopian novel *Niels Klim* from the same period (1741). The perfectly rational system of the city 'Potu' is congruent with its inhabitants, who are in fact trees. The protagonist Niels, who is a human with a body full of fluids and hence passions, cannot adapt to the rational system of trees. Here lies the insight that human imperfection and irrationality must be reflected in society, and the novel clearly has an ironic distance to the utopian genre based on the recognition of the irrational and emotional nature of man.<sup>13</sup>

Holberg concludes the *Third Autobiographical Letter* with the outline of a moral system. Most of what is mentioned here is later repeated and elaborated in Danish in the *Moral Reflections*. His 'systema' starts with a serious discussion of piety, which is found in praxis, then moves on to a discussion of decorum and felicity that relies heavily on stoic notions that these are relative entities that change through history and cultures. Holberg then continues with a discussion of 'concordia' that seems to be based on a natural law perspective of sociability, but ends up in a surprisingly Hobbesian statement that most men are evil, so their concord cannot be good. He continues with an essay on taste, which emphasizes that human taste is generally depraved, but that this might still be beneficial to society as such. It all culminates in a discussion of the stoic proverb 'only the wise is happy' which is turned into the opposite conclusion: 'only fools are happy'. The misanthropy, close to nihilism, of this 'moral system' is a recurrent challenge in much of Holberg's



works that also has been important in twentieth-century interpretations of his comedies.<sup>14</sup> This dark challenge is certainly not the sole conclusion of his moral reflections, but its dynamic presence draws attention to what the notion of a *moral system* will imply for Holberg in the late phase of his authorship.<sup>15</sup>

### Eclecticism and systema

Holberg's use of the concept of 'systema' in his later writings must be considered in light of his explicit eclecticism. Holberg is influenced by the judicial eclecticism of Pufendorf and Thomasius as he writes *Law of Nature*,<sup>16</sup> but the first time Holberg uses the term 'eclectic', is in the discussion of the true philosopher in *Lives of Heroes* (1739). Here eclecticism is explained as a philosophy that constitutes the only way to avoid the slavery of philosophical sects.<sup>17</sup> Later, in *Epistles* III (1749), he states that he is himself an aspiring eclectic, linking this with the better-known ideal of being 'unparteyisch', impartial.<sup>18</sup> In a discussion of Diodorus Siculus and the history of philosophy in *Epistles* IV, he claims that philosophical progress was threatened by disciples who would defend only the systems of their teachers, but that this was finally overcome by the advent of eclectic philosophy.<sup>19</sup> In these sections, Holberg seems to reiterate a typical contemporary historical narrative of eclecticism.<sup>20</sup> Holberg's definition of 'eclecticism' remains somewhat unclear, but it seems to be a concept that is derived from the historicising discourse of natural law and inspired in particular by Christian Thomasius.<sup>21</sup> Holberg shares Thomasius's strong emphasis on anti-sectarianism, but seems even more focused on personal subjectivity and, again, praxis, in his eclectic ideal, whereas he pays less attention to the actual process of selection and combination. There is a discernable tendency towards scepticism in some of Holberg's moral writings, but he carefully avoids this as a possible tenet by eclecticism, explicitly rejecting the sect of Pyrrhonism in Epistle 30.<sup>22</sup>

The importance of eclecticism not only in Holberg's essays but also to understand him as an historian is evident in the third essay of *Moral Reflections* (I, 5).<sup>23</sup> Here he makes a triangle of the three disciplines theology, morality and history: History, he states, is often left out of the first order of important disciplines, but this is only because people tend to forget '[that] morals is predominantly learned through historical examples, and that religion must demonstrate its relevance and authority through histories'.<sup>24</sup> This predominance of history leads directly to a critique of theoretical philosophy and even theology and to a typically careful, modest proposal:

some people, of whom the first was Potamon, decided [. . .] to extract the best from all sects. This philosophy was called Philosophia eclectica. I don't know, whether it is against orthodoxy to wish that there were also a Theologia eclectica, as one observes Christians in the tradition



of the ancient philosophers not to worry so much about finding the truth as defending their respective sects. I do not venture to express such a wish but only confess, that if anybody were to suggest such a *Theologia eclectica*, I would not declare war upon him for it.<sup>25</sup>

History as the frame of morality and religion, and eclecticism as a preferred strategy of investigating the truth, are two methodological elements that should place Holberg's essayistic within the natural law discourse deriving from Pufendorf as opposed to the rationalist school of Leibniz and Wolff 'for whom history could be no real ally'.<sup>26</sup> The intellectual framework for Holberg's essayistic moral philosophy was immediately available in the form of contemporary fashionable eclecticism among German protestant philosophers and theologians.<sup>27</sup> Their methodology not only suited Holberg's interest in history and Pufendorfian natural law, but also his pragmatic attitude, his contempt for pedantry, his scepticism and fascination with paradoxical ideas, but not least, his rejection of subtle, abstract philosophizing.

The concept of a system, 'systema', could be seen as the opposite of eclecticism, but as recent scholarship has demonstrated, they are closely connected in this specific period. Holberg's contemporary protestant theologians and philosophers in Germany, especially J.J. Brucker, through the eclectic method developed an idea of a coherent, autonomous 'philosophical system'. In fact, 'The specific methodological meaning of the term 'system' did not exist before the seventeenth century and the concept conveyed by this term was also foreign to thinkers before that period'.<sup>28</sup> This new, rigorous concept of 'system' was a transformation of theological, religious dogmatism into secular form. Also in Holberg's work, there is a clear connection between eclecticism and the concept of a (moral) 'system', but the dynamic between the eclectic process and its resulting system differs from that observed in Brucker's work.<sup>29</sup> The concept 'system'/'systema' is frequent throughout the authorship and its implications are bound to vary, but Holberg generally presents what he calls 'systems' with ironic distance or even suspicion as something unfinished or subject to critique. When many adhere to a system, this is what constitutes a sect, which is a negative thing to Holberg.<sup>30</sup> Holberg's system seems to be more in accordance with what Horst Dreitzel has shown to be the early, anti-sectarian eclecticism's notion of 'system': 'Die eklektischen 'Systeme' waren deshalb als offene konzipiert, sie reflektierten ihre Unabgeschlossenheit und Wandelbarkeit, u.a. durch die Diskussion ungelöster Probleme'.<sup>31</sup>

In an important essay in *Moral Reflections* II, 85 Holberg demonstrates his understanding of a system in a theological context. First he gives a brief historical account of protestant sectarianism, which according to Holberg repeats the mistake of Catholicism as it establishes authoritative dogmas that are expected to be accepted without personal examination. He then establishes his own, tentative system based on the three principles of 1)



only believing what is in accordance with the senses, 2) believing nothing incompatible with the foundations of one's own teaching, i.e. the necessity of toleration and 3) abandoning everything that contradicts the accepted moral qualities of God. He concludes that he does not want others to adopt this system, but to read and examine everything for themselves. The moral command is not 'have faith', but 'search'.

It seems that the term 'system', although it implies a core of some fundamental principles, does not necessarily suggest strict inner coherence. Several commentators have noted Holberg's unclear notion of 'systema'.<sup>32</sup> Of his novel *Niels Klim*, Holberg claims that it contains *material* for a moral system, perhaps implying that this material is not *arranged* as a system.<sup>33</sup> In the brief foreword to the reader in *Moral Reflections*, the conspicuous use of the term clearly indicates a consciousness that 'systema' is a contested concept. Holberg claims that the book 'contains a total moral system' but immediately modifies this by stating that this system is a 'mixture of jest and earnest'.<sup>34</sup> He then proceeds to explain the personal nature of this system and that it is the work of a dying man who wants to write his system before his final departure. Later, in Epistle 425, he speaks of his *Moral Reflections* as 'a complete moral and paradoxical system'.<sup>35</sup> Even if he by 'paradox' means 'against doxa', and not 'against logic', this formulation still leaves the reader in some confusion about the nature of this system as such.

The 'system' is open and dynamic because it is particular to its author. From Holberg's use of the term, it seems clear that when a moral philosopher presents a system, this is a strictly personal construction of thought that cannot and should not survive its inventor. A student should never simply accept the system of his teacher; he must independently make his own, idiosyncratic system by eclectic gathering from different sources. Because of this defining, subjective element, personal biography and even physical experience are necessary parts of the presentation of a (paradoxical) moral system and probably closely connected to his favourite ideal 'know thyself'. The eclectic system of Holberg is therefore 'coherent' and 'autonomous' only in its close identity with the subject who conceives it, not in a modern logical or scientific sense.

These notions of system and eclecticism materialize in the essayistic mode of Holberg's *Moral Reflections* and *Epistles* and are keys to his concepts of 'philosophy', 'theology', 'sects', 'partiality', 'scepticism', 'method' and, not least, 'truth'. His specifically moral (and theological) 'systema' is predominantly presented as a personal, subjective construction that consists of changing ideas and arguments that might be in flux or even contradict each other, but that are controlled by certain basic axioms of the kind mentioned above, such as never to accept anything that contradicts the moral qualities of God. If, for instance, the problem of evil implicitly challenges this axiom, then the incoherence can be accepted as a 'mystery'. His personal 'systema'<sup>36</sup> can embody radicalism, revelation, mystery, contradictions – and also irony and jest.



It should be noted, that when *Moral Reflections*, with countless small additions and omissions, is translated and published anonymously in English in 1750 as *The Reflector*, and later reissued in 1762 as *The Tablet*, it is systematized under the four headings 'Literature and Education', 'Of Intercourse and Business', 'Of Government and Laws' and 'Of Religion and Revelation', developing from the individual sphere via that of private and public society to culminate in society with God. This is a total rearrangement of the arbitrary order of the original which is dependent upon the randomness of the original epigrams that the essays elaborate.<sup>37</sup> But without the strong authorial presence of Holberg, this anonymous English version becomes an abstract and unconvincing system of argument. It is not established that Holberg himself took any part in this English edition, which is generally attributed to the physician Peter Shaw.<sup>38</sup> Under Shaw's name, Holberg's essayistic reflections on issues such as psychosomatic sickness and satire have had some modest afterlife in English culture, but are less quoted for their somewhat conservative moral ideas.

### The morals of *Moral Reflections* (1744)

In the essays of *Moral Reflections*<sup>39</sup> Holberg picks up many of the opinions on morality and religion that he had already discussed in the *Third Autobiographical Letter* and in the utopian travel account *Niels Klim*. These essays are written as elaborations on the Latin epigrams he had published in 1737 and each text typically takes its departure from some paradox or unconventional idea which is negotiated up to a point where the author often states that he can reach no conclusion and submits his reflections to the judgment of his readers.

The representatives of the modern tradition of moral essayistic that Holberg explicitly mentions in his foreword as adversaries whom he would like to correct, are Pierre Bayle, who according to Holberg challenges opinions just because they are widely held, but more prominently Jacques Esprit (1611–77), who in *Discourses on the Deceitfulness of Humane Virtues* (1678) had held that all virtues derive from vices.<sup>40</sup> Another prominent antagonist in *Moral Reflections* is Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733). Holberg makes a connection between Mandeville and Seneca in the foreword; both had commented upon the paradoxical necessity of material evils in a society, sickness is beneficial for doctors, wars for soldiers etc. But the crucial point is Mandeville's extension of this idea to the necessity of *vice* in a society.

Although Holberg is fascinated by this radical or 'paradoxical' train of thought, his project is to refute these attacks on the importance of social morality. Bayle had famously stated that he believed there actually could be such a thing as a society of atheists, thereby denying that even minimal natural religion is necessary as a societal basis. Holberg explicitly rejects this opinion in essay I, 81, where he discusses the extent of tolerance in a



society.<sup>41</sup> His position is that anything that does not challenge the laws and stability of society should be tolerated. But atheists have only their personal gain in mind and will commit hidden crimes to achieve their egoistic ends, they can therefore not be tolerated ‘over time’:

So I cannot approve of Mr. Bayle, who contends, that a republic of atheists can subsist. For an Atheus, who believes in no other god than his own merit and worth, will not refrain from the most serious wrong doing, if it can only remain hidden.<sup>42</sup>

The atheist is in this essay associated with the pure egoism of Mandeville. Holberg does not take the pragmatic stance that if seemingly egoistic, stupid or even evil actions are proven to have positive social effects, then they are in some sense acceptable, which might be compatible with his Pufendorbian perspective. But he chooses another path by considering intentions and conscience. Holberg readily admits that much apparent virtue can be reduced to the hope of reward on earth or in afterlife. But he contends that this does not mean that *all* virtue can be reduced in this way; he insists that it is also possible to discern in history true, virtuous feelings of benevolence, mercy and sociability. So, the moral question is turned into an empirical investigation of historical fact.

A key essay is I, 117, where he confronts Jacques Esprit’s reduction of all virtue to vice. Holberg here accepts the condition that in order to be judged as virtuous, the good deed must have an internal psychological basis in the person’s motives. Holberg contends that history shows examples (though sporadic) of true virtue; it is indisputable that Socrates was righteous, that Cato was honest and that heroic virtue has been demonstrated in some rare cases when people have sacrificed themselves, such as the Christian martyrs. But as he quickly seems to run out of convincing examples, he goes on to make the general point that if the intention behind good deeds is either a sense of obligation, a simple wish to be considered an honest man, or even a hope of reward in afterlife, then it is futile sophistry to call this egoistic and question the concept of virtue as such. The conclusion in this central essay is that whoever is virtuous without any concern for personal gain is good, and whoever is virtuous at own expense, is a hero. One could hardly claim that Esprit’s reduction of moral motivation is thereby logically refuted; it is considered and dismissed on pragmatic grounds as dogmatic and subtle theorizing; yet it retains relevance as a paradoxical insight in the eclectic, personal system Holberg is constructing.

How far does the historical method go? Essay II, 96 is a key example of the unresolved problem of historical relativism. The essay presents numerous examples of how both ethical and aesthetical judgment is determined by historical context. Only in the very last paragraph, Holberg suddenly changes his argument and claims that the ‘true philosopher’ will consider ‘the case on its merit, so that for him a virtue will always be a virtue, and



a vice always a vice'.<sup>43</sup> Rhetorically this assertion hardly seems convincing within the argument of the essay and it seems to highlight the question of what a true philosopher is and whether such a person actually exists in history. Holberg certainly does not himself claim such standing, but he does take this problem of the historical existence of actual moral virtue seriously. It is evident in his historical texts that the search for true virtue is a major concern. This applies not only to *Lives of Heroes*, which discusses moral virtue in history, mainly outside the Christian realm,<sup>44</sup> but also to his earlier national histories. In the *History of Denmark*, the many kings of the Oldenburg dynasty are prime examples of virtue secured through heavenly intervention.

Throughout *Moral Reflections*, Holberg repeatedly observes how the basic values of life change and are understood differently from context to context, which seems to imply a fundamental relativity of taste. He does, however, make a distinction between aesthetics and ethics. With matters of taste, it can be argued that Holberg ends in a subjective relativism that finds it practical to embrace whatever the current fashion prescribes, but when it comes to ethics, the moral core of religion is all the more evident. The question is how to define this core between the pure natural religion of Pufendorf with its severely limited concept of the divinity and the Christian God of revealed religion. Holberg's main principle, which he states repeatedly, is not to embrace anything that is contrary to what he sometimes calls the 'attributes' or 'qualities of God' and elsewhere defines as 'God's benevolence and holiness'.<sup>45</sup>

Holberg thereby escapes the problem of establishing the virtues by means of reason. Mandeville may pose a problem for a Pufendorffian scheme of morality as arising from the necessity of being social and understood by rational inference. For Holberg there is no Mandevillean problem of the foundation of morals; morality flows directly from a God who is wise, just and good and therefore has given humans the capacity to recognize such qualities.

Holberg does not entirely avoid traditional theological debate. He is for instance aware that there are arguments against the assertion that God is good.<sup>46</sup> One such argument was that this deprives Him of the prime quality of being almighty, of doing whatever He pleases. The other argument is that God should not be judged through human virtues. Holberg rejects both these arguments:

There are some, who [...] say, that one should not limit the omnipotence of God, item, that one should not judge God's virtues by human virtues, yes, that God's righteousness consists in doing what he pleases. But the omnipotence of God is not limited by saying, that he cannot renounce his holiness and deny himself, and to make that into God's virtues, which he himself rejects and condemns in man, is not only to overthrow all natural religion, but even revelation, which states that



what he recommends as human virtues, are properties of his own nature. For it is written: Be merciful, as your Father is merciful.<sup>47</sup>

Holberg's idea in *Moral Reflections* of the virtuous overlap between God and man is at variance with the natural theology that Pufendorf thought sufficed for natural law. Beneath the essayistic flux, scepticism and lurking relativism of Holberg's eclectic procedure there is one core assumption about God and man that gives his *systema* some stability in face of contemporary challenges. But is Holberg's wise, just and good God considered still to be within natural religion, or does this figure cross the border to Christian faith and revelation? This is a central question, and Holberg is notoriously ambiguous in his answers, as can be noted in the quotation above, where he is explicitly concerned about natural religion, but then in the same breath moves on to revelation and scripture. In the more formal essays of *Epistles* he will elaborate on which further theological insights can be derived from the virtuous God.

### *Epistles* (1748–54)

If the basic theme in *Moral Reflections* was a critical dialogue with Seneca, Esprit and Mandeville, *Epistles* primarily confronts Pierre Bayle and British deism on questions of morality and religion. In his foreword Holberg claims that his book will predominantly be concerned with secular affairs and not questions of moral theology. Nonetheless the collection starts with a clear emphasis on a series of issues that involve religious, theological and moral questions, and although Holberg increasingly makes digressions, often fragmentary, on a number of worldly problems of more or less obvious moral relevance, religious and moral themes recur throughout the 539 essays of *Epistles*, published in five volumes: I–II in 1748, III–IV in 1750 and V posthumously in his year of death, 1754. Even though *Epistles* contains more formal discussions compared to the paradoxical form of *Moral Reflections*, it is still very much within Holberg's eclectic method, shifting between the personal and the political, the theoretical and the practical – all with an unstable element of wit, humour and irony. The indisputable core is the method of repeatedly stating the necessity of sincere, personal investigation of truth.

In the first volumes of *Epistles*, Holberg steps back from the dominant discussion in *Moral Reflections* of the foundation of virtue and focuses on the issue of theodicy as presented by Pierre Bayle. The problem of evil is at the heart of Holberg's reflections, as this was Bayle's prime example of the inexplicable paradoxes of Christian faith and important for his demonstration of the unreasonableness of religion. Holberg is content to solve the problem of theodicy in the first epistle by simply stating that the necessary gift of free will seems to presuppose the possibility of evil deeds and suffering. His concern, however, is less to clarify a specific dogma, than to



demonstrate that ordinary reason is useful in solving religious questions. What interests him is the balance between reason on one hand and faith and revelation on the other. He seems quite consistent in the view that there is a large degree of congruence between these two domains, but never full identity.

This places him between, on one hand, Bayle and the notion of an irrational religion (fideism) and, on the other, a different radicalism, namely that of the English deists who tried to make Christianity fully compatible with reason.<sup>48</sup> War on these two fronts requires changing emphases in the argument of *Epistles*; when he argues with Bayle on theological matters, Holberg will stress the congruence of reason and religion, but when he argues with the deists, he will lay weight on the necessity of revelation that transcends reason. His main point is always that both are necessary when one's intellectual quest is to navigate between 'Bohemian brethren and naturalists',<sup>49</sup> where Bayle's pretended defence of irrational religion is parallel to pietism, whereas 'naturalists' implies deism.

Holberg's interest in deist debate is not sufficiently studied. He spent more than two years in England (1706–8), mainly in Oxford, and he read English. He often commented (favourably) on English humour, wit, politics and contemporary English intellectuals from deists such as Tindal and Collins to more moderate figures such as Locke, Shaftesbury and Prideaux.<sup>50</sup> Only partial records of Holberg's library have been preserved, but among deist works he is known to have owned, are Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724), Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1731) and Thomas Woolston: *A Discourse on the Miracles of our Saviour* (1729). In *Epistles* he also commented on Henry Dodwell, *Christianity not Founded on Argument* and alluded to John Toland, Thomas Chubb and others. This is not to say that Holberg was a disguised deist, but he seems close to intellectuals who kept a friendly and interested dialogue with deism. One might say that he needed radical ideas as an extreme reference point in his eclectic method.

Even though the essays in *Epistles* are more stringent and formal than those in *Moral Reflections*, Holberg continues to criticize or even ridicule philosophical and theological subtleties. When he discusses proofs of God's existence, his starting point, as so often, is from English debate, in this case Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). After general praise of Cudworth, Holberg turns critical of the Englishman's idea of some intermediary force between God and creation, a notion Holberg finds utterly superfluous. Cudworth exemplifies writers whose arguments are 'far too abstract and incomprehensible' and therefore enters the long line of representatives of what Holberg perceives as subtle and irrelevant theoretical abstraction.<sup>51</sup> The most prominent case is Leibniz, although his theological ideas of such things as a virtuous God, free will and the afterlife are ones that Holberg would sympathize with, but which he hardly mentions.



Instead of philosophical reasoning, Holberg musters two proofs of God's existence that he holds to be commonsensical; 1) creation itself, since nothing comes from nothing and 2) the religious beliefs of all nations. The latter resembles his reasoning about natural law; one of the (few) universals allegedly found by inspecting all known cultures, was religion and the idea of a god. This is a strong parallel to the proof presented in one of Holberg's favourite works, Hugo Grotius' *The Truth of the Christian Religion* (Book I, Section 2), one of the books that he thought saved him from the lures of free-thinking in his youth. Grotius' commonsensical defence of religion may be the major influence behind Holberg's critique of the radicals, although he rarely calls upon this work in his essays. However, in *Third Autobiographical Letter* Holberg had stated that he never grew tired of consulting Grotius, whose *De jure belli ac pacis* was new on every reading. Importantly, in *Epistles* Grotius also emerges as a methodological ideal and the first to have 'examined religion from scratch',<sup>52</sup> somebody that 'only searched after the truth, and never committed himself to any sect [Partie]'.<sup>53</sup> Considering that Holberg had compiled so much from Pufendorf's work, it is striking that outside of Holberg's *Natural Law* the German thinker is rarely found in Holberg's many lists of prominent thinkers, whereas Grotius and Le Clerc regularly feature. This might be explained by Holberg's problems with Pufendorf's rigorous attitude towards moral theology and his denial of any morality inherent in nature,<sup>54</sup> but also by a wish not to be considered a sectarian pupil of the German's system.

The Bible is a vastly more prominent authority in *Epistles* than in *Moral Reflections*. It has been suggested that Holberg's views on basic theological matters are inconsistent or that he changes his views from the first two tomes of 1748, where he seems inclined to emphasize reason, to the third, fourth (1750) and fifth (1754) tomes, where he resorts to revelation and the biblical text.<sup>55</sup> But this is hardly the late development of an aging author; already in the first chapters in his *Jewish History* (1742) he repeatedly proposed the literal text of the Pentateuch as the better alternative when rational discourse on creation and the origin of man could deliver no straight answers. The same rhetorical strategy was evident already in his *Law of Nature*.

However, it is important to keep in mind that Holberg's use of the Biblical text is within the rhetorical 'we' of the Danish, protestant public, and also within his personal 'systema'. The context of the text is not a universal audience; Holberg does not ask the Arabs or the Chinese to accept the literal content of the Books of Moses. It is what he himself chooses. In the incomprehensible matters of revealed religion, 'we must blindly believe what we are commanded to believe', as Holberg puts it in Epistle 17, prudently leaving out the authority behind such a command, whether it is God himself, the historical authors of the Bible or the Danish king as head of the state church – distinctions which might be of only academic interest to Holberg as long as society is stable and people have good reason to behave sociably.<sup>56</sup> We should listen to reason; still some matters remain unsolvable,



but as protestant Danes 'we' can calmly lean on the word of scripture as interpreted here, in which we are compelled to believe.

Even if it seems fair to say that his repeated references to Scripture has an ambience of consciously cultural bias about them, the distinction between what emerges as either cultural or universal is often blurred. The idea of an innate universal moral sense remains at the core of Holberg's system of moral religion in *Epistles*. In direct opposition to Hobbes and Locke, Holberg in Epistle 144 claims the golden rule as an example of human divine morality that is just as innate as the principle of contradiction, echoing a Pufendorfan comment from *Law of Nature*.<sup>57</sup> An example of what seems more culturally dependent, is the major issue of the pedagogical function of revelation, a point he had made both in *Niels Klim* and *Jewish History*. In Epistle 9, Holberg uses James Foster's critique of the deist Matthew Tindal to this purpose.<sup>58</sup> Pedagogy is also the framework of Epistle 46 that discusses what religious teachings children should first learn in school. Here Holberg defines what is commonly regarded as his understanding of natural religion. He remarks that this is also the moral core of religion, thereby defining universal morality and religion in six rough headings. These are 1) the existence of one creator god, 2) the duty to worship this god, 3) afterlife with punishment and reward, 4) only to accept what is proven and according to human experience, 5) never accept any teaching that contradicts God's properties such as omnipotence, wisdom and justice, 6) show mercy towards the errant and judge not those who follow their conscience.<sup>59</sup>

It is part of the ambiguity of Epistle 46 that it elaborates on the six headings three times, each time adding something new, such as ordinary providence and man's free will as flowing from number one, which hardly would be obvious to everybody. The essay extends the seemingly radical number (4) to allow for biblical miracles and prophecies as reasonable proof, as he had amply demonstrated in *Jewish History*. This way of adapting to both radical and orthodox systems at the same time and even within an ambiguous frame such as these pedagogical considerations is typical of Holberg's essayistic prose and should only be considered to constitute a theological system in the specific and idiosyncratic sense discussed above.

What constitutes a good Christian in Holberg's argument in is fact the same as what constitutes a good 'philosopher': that is simply moral behaviour in everyday practice.<sup>60</sup> Apart from this, it would be futile to reconstruct a moral or theological system in the strict sense of the word in Holberg's essays. His notion of system is far from a rationalistic ideal of a set of abstract, coherent ideas; it is on the contrary pervaded by the idea of eclecticism, that in a Holbergian context is subjective, thoroughly contextualized in Danish culture and with little emphasis on logical coherence, as it is always reflective. He chooses, as he must, to believe in the Bible, that God is good and that this is a part of natural, universal religion. In an influential study of Holberg's essays, it has been claimed that Holberg's main contribution as a moral philosopher was that he:



changed the idea of one universal moral code by showing the immense variation of moral norms through time and from one country to another. Through his sense of realism, he changed the study of moral rules into the study of human nature.<sup>61</sup>

Holberg is then interpreted as a proponent of ‘moral relativism’. There is something to this thesis, but Holberg’s eclecticism is distinguished from relativism in that it retains a notion of honest truth-seeking and he does not consider all systems as equally good or valid in his perspective. More than human nature, Holberg explores his own nature, or rather personae, in his essays. Not only relativism, but also misanthropy, scepticism and even nihilism can be recognized as threatening presences in Holberg’s moral universe. What is more, as argued in the Introduction, his eclectic approach in the essays may be seen as part of a broader strategy with an even wider range of personae with overlapping offices. But in the end, it was all penned in the safe and solid professorial chair at the University of Copenhagen and the professor’s personal and authorial presence in the essays may seem to claim that *he* was in control.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. the pejorative concept of ‘moderate Enlightenment’ as opposed to ‘radical Enlightenment’ in Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: 2001). For a constructive definition of ‘religious Enlightenment’ see David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment. Protestants, Jews and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, NJ: 2008), ‘Introduction’, which seems relevant to Holberg on most parameters, except maybe Holberg’s inclination towards a state church governed by the king.
- 2 My comments on natural law and especially Thomasius rely heavily on Tim Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: 2000).
- 3 Kristoffer Schmidt, *Ludvig Holbergs Heltehistorier. Mellem moralfilosofi og historie* (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen: 2015) has demonstrated Bayle to be an important source in *Lives of Heroes*, and Schmidt discusses how far moral relativism reaches into Holberg’s reflections on exotic states. Cf. Chapter 5.
- 4 On this compilation of Pufendorf’s work set in a Danish context, see chapter 3.
- 5 The Danish protestant argument for absolutism in contest with the natural law theories of Grotius and Pufendorf is described in Edvard Holm, *Holbergs statsretslige og politiske synsmaade* (Copenhagen: 1975 [1879]), 7. See also Frank Grunert, ‘Zur aufgeklärten Kritik am theokratischen Absolutismus. Der Streit zwischen Hector Gottfried Masius und Christian Thomasius über Ursprung und Begründung der summa potestas’, in *Christian Thomasius (1655–1728), Neue Forschungen im Kontext der Frühaufklärung*, ed. F. Vollhardt (Tübingen: 1997), and Hochstrasser on ‘The Scandic Quarrel’ in *Natural Law Theories*, 40. Pufendorf’s explanation of the foundation of morality was highly controversial, but Holberg avoided these problems by simply referring to qualities of God. In contrast to Masius, however, he was reluctant to equate this basic religion with protestant theology.
- 6 Samuel Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, [1672], ed. J. Barbeyrac, trans. Basil Kennet (London: 1729), 64. Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man*,



- According to the Law of Nature* [1673], trans. A. Tooke [1673]), ed. I. Hunter, D. Saunders, (Indianapolis, IN: 2003).
- 7 Holberg, *Introduction til Natur- og Folkeretten* (1734), I.2.18. Cf. chapter 3, pp. 65–66.
  - 8 Holberg, *Natur- og Folkeretten* (1716), b1r.
  - 9 A. Kragelund, *Holberg og Seneca* (Copenhagen: 1983), 59.
  - 10 A comprehensive discussion of Holberg's relationship to classical influences is sorely lacking, but it is remedied by Ole Thomsen's forthcoming *Pessimist og munter*, which I have had the opportunity to read in manuscript and to which I am heavily indebted in this chapter.
  - 11 Holberg, *Adskillige Store Heltes og Berømmelige Mænds . . . Historier*, 456
  - 12 Kathleen M. Grange, 'The ship symbol as the key to former theories of the emotions', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 36 (1962) traces the ship and wind allegory from antiquity to the end of the 18th century as a key symbol for passions and reason in a debate between a Stoic and an Aristotelean theory of the passions. Holberg's version of the allegory seems to balance the importance of emotions and reason; both are equally necessary.
  - 13 Cf. chapter 6.
  - 14 Cf. Jens Kruuse, *Holbergs maske* (Copenhagen: 1964).
  - 15 Holberg's phrase is 'Specimen qvoddam Systematis Moralis'. 'Qvoddam' implies Holberg's reluctance as this is only 'kind of' a sample of a moral system.
  - 16 Sören Koch, 'En naturlig rettsorden for det dansk-norske kongeriket. En retshistorisk analyse av Ludvig Holbergs lærebok i natur- og folkerett' (PhD diss., University of Bergen: 2015), 165.
  - 17 Holberg, *Store Heltes Historier*, 464.
  - 18 Holberg, *Epistler*, III, 473: 'I have demonstrated at certain places in my writings, that all ancient philosophers by their teachings have sought not so much to teach, as to defend some doctrines adopted by themselves, until, finally, the so called eclectic philosophy emerged, which would not commit itself to any particular party, but decided to search for truth without prejudice so that they committed to no sect. Such is also my intention, wherefore I also suffer the same fate'. Of the ideal of being 'unparteyisch', see chapter 9.
  - 19 *Epistler*, IV, 216: 'The first hindrance was, that most disciples stubbornly sought only to defend and strengthen the systemata of their teachers. [. . .] Notwithstanding these hindrances, sciences made great progress, and philosophy got going properly as Potamon, originator of the eclectic philosophy, founded a school, in which one did not commit to any given sect, but sought to choose the best from all'.
  - 20 See Horst Dreitzel, 'Zur Entwicklung und Eigenart der "eklektischen Philosophie"', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 18 (1991): 282. Cf. 13ff. above.
  - 21 For a discussion of Thomasius' use of 'eclecticism' and history of philosophy, see Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories*, 121. Holberg's comments on eclecticism, but not on system, seem very close to Thomasius as quoted and described by Hochstrasser.
  - 22 Cf. Martin Mulsow, 'Eclecticism or scepticism. A problem of the early enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 465–477, on the interaction of scepticism and eclecticism. Cf. 17–18 above.
  - 23 The essays in *Moral Reflections* have no headings; the identifying numbers relate to the original epigrams inspiring the essays and only some of them are stated in the essays. This essay is the third but is connected to the fifth epigram of the first book of epigrams and is therefore referred to as 'I, 5'.
  - 24 *Moralske Tanker*, I, 55.
  - 25 *Moralske Tanker*, I, 56.
  - 26 Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories*, 6. Holberg opens his work on natural law with a very condensed history of natural law and morality, thereby differing from



Pufendorf's foreword in *De officio* and maybe signalling an affinity with the contemporary German eclecticism already at that early stage (1716) although he does not use the term 'eclectic' until later.

- 27 As described by Dreitzel, 'Zur Entwicklung und Eigenart der 'eklektischen Philosophie'', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, 18 (1991): 281–343; Ulrik Johannes Schneider, 'Eclecticism rediscovered', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998): 173–182; and Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories*.
- 28 Leo Catana, *The Historiographical Concept 'System of Philosophy'. Its Origin, Nature, Influence and Legitimacy* (Leiden: 2008), 284.
- 29 Cf. Dreitzel, 'Zur Entwicklung', 288, who distinguishes between the eclecticism of Le Clerc and Thomasius, who focus on eclecticism as method and critique of dogmatic rationalism, and of Brucker, who underlines the systematic result of eclectic processes.
- 30 Cf. *Epistler* IV, 339–342 (No. 366). A relevant discussion that in contrast to Holberg seems to favour the notion of system over history and eclecticism, is Donald R. Kelley, 'Between history and system', in *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Gianna Pomata and Nancy G. Siraisi (Cambridge, MA: 2005).
- 31 Dreitzel, 'Zur Entwicklung . . .', 290. Holberg's personal system might be associated with what Dreitzel (291) criticizes as 'Popularphilosophie'.
- 32 Cf. Ludvig Selmer, *Holberg og religionen* (Kritiania: 1914), 43. Holberg's unsystematized system is also noted by F. J. Billeskov Jansen, *Holberg som epigrammatiker og essayist*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: 1938–9), Lars Roar Langslet, *Den store ensomme. En biografi om Ludvig Holberg* (Oslo: 2001), and Thomsen, *Pessimist og munter*.
- 33 Cf *Moralske Tanker*, 'Preparation', 19.
- 34 *Moralske Tanker*.
- 35 *Epistler* IV, 437.
- 36 Holberg predominantly uses the term 'systema' in its Latin form as a sign of its technical status.
- 37 Cf. note 23.
- 38 If Shaw had anything to do with this edition, he could only be called an editor, although a very active editor who rearranges bits and pieces of Holberg's essays and systematically leaves out the author's explicit references to his own works. However, he also shows deep knowledge of Holberg's work as he occasionally puts in elements from other of Holberg's texts and new allusions to *Niels Klim* where they do not appear in the original. If it is not Shaw, the identity of this active editor remains a conundrum.
- 39 *Moral Reflections* was twice translated into German in the 1740s and also into Dutch and is seen as part of the 'Spectator literature' of its time. The first German translation appeared very quickly as *Ludwig Holbergs Moralische Abhandlungen* (Copenhagen and Leipzig: 1744). The next came a year later with critique of the first and the alleged approval from Holberg himself as *Ludwig Holbergs Moralische Gedanken*, trans. Caspar Reichard (Leipzig: 1744, 2nd ed. 1753). The Dutch edition, *De Deensche Spectator*, trans. Steeve van Esveldt (Amsterdam: 1748), is a rearranged compilation. A French translation was issued in Copenhagen 1749: *Pensées Morales*, translated by Jean-Baptiste Desroches de Partenay.
- 40 Holberg also mentions *Esprit* in his 'Epistola ad virum perillustrem tertia' (1743), argues against his reduction of virtues to vices and names him a 'reckless project maker' ('temerarius Novator').
- 41 He had already briefly demonstrated the failure of an atheist society in *Niels Klim* in the land of Micolak (*Niels Klim*, 170). A later and more elaborate refutation



of Bayle's claim is found in Epistle 335, where Holberg argues that an Epicurean sect, one of Bayle's examples, differs from a real society.

42 *Moralske Tanker* I, 86.

43 *Moralske Tanker* II, 389.

44 See chapter 5.

45 *Moralske Tanker* II, Ep 90.

46 *Moralske Tanker* II, Ep 90.

47 *Moralske Tanker*, I, 367.

48 The theology of Holberg is discussed thoroughly in Ludvig Selmer, *Ludvig Holberg og religionen* (Kristiania: 1914). Very useful is also F. J. Billeskov Jansen's comments to *Epistler*, where he strongly emphasizes Holberg's interest in Bayle: Ludvig Holberg, *Epistler*, 8 vols., ed. F. J. Billeskov Jansen (Copenhagen: 1944–54), vols. 6–7.

49 *Epistler* I, 91.

50 A modern discussion of the English influence on Holberg is Gerald S. Argetsinger, 'Ludvig Holberg and the Anglo-American world', in *Ludvig Holberg: a European Writer: A Study in Influence and Reception*, ed. Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam: 1994), 139–162, but whereas Argetsinger points to several key figures that Holberg mentions, such as Addison and Steele, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Locke and others, he misses the deists. This can be explained by the fact that Holberg's discussions of deism are often left out of anthologies of his essays, as they are somewhat dry and theoretical and rarely exhibit striking examples of the wit of the author.

51 *Epistler* I. 276. Cf. Jansen's comments on the debate on Cudworth by Holberg's favourites Le Clerc and Bayle in Holberg, *Epistler*, ed. Jansen, VI, 102.

52 *Epistler* I, 260.

53 *Epistles* IV, 102.

54 Cf. chapter 3 above.

55 Cf. Jansen's commentary, *Epistler*, VI, 12. The relevant epistles are 225, 232, 274, 320, 322.

56 *Epistler*, I. 95–96.

57 *Epistler*, II. 265. Cf. chapter 3, 000–000. Holberg also argues the importance of the Golden rule in a critique of Shaftesbury in Epistle 119.

58 Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (London: 1730) had been attacked by James Foster in *The Usefulness, Truth and Excellency of the Christian Revelation* (London: 1731), and Holberg concurs with Foster that revelation is useful.

59 *Epistler* I.246–255. Cf. Selmer, *Holberg og religionen*, 102–103, who interprets Holberg's 'moral catechism' as compatible with English deism and the natural religion of Herbert of Cherbury, perhaps simplifying somewhat the rhetorical dynamics of Epistle 46. Herbert is not among the authorities regularly mentioned by Holberg.

60 Selmer, *Holberg og religionen*, 63, emphasizes how sacraments, prayer, dogma or religious sentiment are all secondary to moral behaviour in Holberg's reflections on religion.

61 Jansen, *Holberg som epigrammatiker og essayist*, II, 154



## 5 *Heroes and Heroines: the lives of men and women*

*Kristoffer Schmidt*

In 1739 Ludvig Holberg published his biographical collection *Lives of Heroes*. The book was an imitation of the Greek historian Plutarch's *Vitae Parallelae* and comprised a total of twelve parallel biographies. *Heroes* became an immense success and within fifty years it was published in three Danish, five German, three Dutch and one Russian versions. Its popularity even spawned a sequel, *Lives of Heroines* (1745), consisting of eleven parallel biographies. Not as popular as its predecessor, *Heroines* still received positive reviews and was translated into German, Dutch, Swedish and Russian. A sample even made it into English when, in 1768, the chaplain and secretary of the British embassy in Denmark, John Lettice, published an abridged English translation of the parallel biography of the Danish counselor to Christian II, Sigbrit Villoms, and the Ottoman Mehmed I's favourite concubine and later valide sultan Kösem Sultan. Despite the contemporary success, both works have received little scholarly attention up until the turn of the millennium.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter places *Heroes* and *Heroines* in Holberg's authorship and examines his definition of a hero. The latter is not as straightforward as one might think. In fact, scholars have never fully agreed upon who either the heroes or the villains of *Heroes* and *Heroines* were.<sup>2</sup> By trying to settle this question we will shed light on the complexity of Holberg's concept of the heroic and its opposite. An integral part of *Heroes* and *Heroines* are the moral themes in each parallel biography. Some of these will be analysed at length with special attention to the recurring and central moral themes in both books, among them women's role in society, a topic that has generated several studies,<sup>3</sup> but only a few have included *Heroines*.<sup>4</sup> We will therefore compare the views expressed in *Heroines* with Holberg's overall view on women's role in society.

### The structure of *Heroes*

Although *Heroes* is an imitation of Plutarch's parallel biographical method from *Vitae Parallelae*, there are differences. Each of Plutarch's double



biographies ends with a comparison between the vices and virtues of those portrayed, and in some instances there is an opening segment in the first biography where he discusses a historical or moral subject relating to the parallel biography. The subjects vary from the curious way history repeats itself (Sertorius and Eumenes) to thoughts about inverted snobbery (Agis and Cleomenes and Tiberius Gracchus and Gaius Gracchus).<sup>5</sup>

*Heroes* also consists of parallel biographies that end with a comparison. Holberg must have found the idea of connecting a moral or historical subject with the biographies intriguing since all twelve parallel biographies follow this pattern. However, instead of incorporating a topic in the first of two parallel biographies, Holberg supplemented each parallel biography with an introduction, wherein he presented his moral theme. Like *Vitae Parallelae* the moral subjects in *Heroes* and *Heroines* vary. For instance, a discussion of climatic determinism, a critique of the classical Greek warrior hero, a characterization of a true philosopher, thoughts about women's abilities, etc.

Holberg was not the first to write an imitation of Plutarch. In fact, he followed in the footsteps of several notable French authors such as the historians Antoine Varillas and René Rapin. Varillas supplemented his biographies on Francis I and Louis XI of France with Plutarchian comparisons. The former he compared with Charles V and the latter with Ferdinand II of Aragon.<sup>6</sup> In both cases, the biased author clearly favoured the French kings. Rapin's comparisons were different and more like Plutarch's and Holberg's. Each of his four parallel biographies started with an *avertissement* that followed the *historia magistra vitae* tradition and used the portrayed as examples of certain literary and academic disciplines. Demosthenes and Cicero represented eloquence, Homer and Virgil poetry, Thucydides and Livy history and Aristotle and Plato philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Varillas' and Rapin's writings are just a few examples among many. Others such as Charles de Saint-Évremond, Daniel Lombard, Charles-Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre, François Blondel and René Richard either constructed parallel biographies inspired by Plutarch's method or theorized about the usefulness of the method. What made Holberg different from his French predecessors and contemporaries as well as from Plutarch was that the majority of his characters were non-European.

### Heroes, villains or neither

Whereas Plutarch always compared a Roman with a Greek, Holberg primarily portrayed Orientals and Indians such as the Mogul emperors Akbar and Aurangzeb, the Mongol warlord Genghis Khan, the Tatar emperor Tamerlane, the Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the Aztec ruler Montezuma and the Incan ruler Atahualpa. Holberg speculated that some of his readers might wonder about such an exotic gallery of characters. To this, he replied that:



the achievements of the Roman, Greek and other European heroes are well known, and [to write their lives] would be no more [of an accomplishment], than to summarize what countless other authors before have written. Hence, I have found it better to write about the achievements of Oriental and Indian heroes since these are more unknown to us and therefore taste of novelty.<sup>8</sup>

It has been suggested that Holberg was trying to make a virtue of necessity since he was unable to find any Danish equivalents to such Swedish kings as Gustavus Adolphus.<sup>9</sup> Since he had little hesitation in blowing the trumpet of Danish royalty, it is more likely that he truly wanted to provide the reading audience with something new and something that would sell. At the time Holberg published *Heroes*, Danish books about Orientals and Indian Americans were scarce and the appeal of many of the book's biographies cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, Holberg had already portrayed a vast amount of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish kings and queens in his *History of Denmark*. Here he also made Plutarchian comparisons between the Danish king Christian IV and the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus as well as between the Danish queen and wife of Frederick III, Sophie Amalie of Brunswick-Lüneburg, and the Swedish queen Christina. In both comparisons, Holberg favoured his compatriot.<sup>10</sup>

*Heroes* also contains biographies of Peter the Great, his consort Catherine I, the Bohemian general Jan Žižka, the Albanian warlord George Kastrioti Skanderbeg as well as Zenobia, Sulla, Julius Caesar, Socrates and Epaminondas. Thus not all of Holberg's historical figures are Oriental or Indian, nor are they all heroes. In fact, many of the biographies are about historical figures whom Holberg only regarded as 'notable'. Their heroic achievements were few and unimpressive and several of them were reprehensible characters. They were portrayed accordingly, for Holberg could still derive important moral points from their lives, and the merely notable were an integral part of *Heroes*. In fact, the full title of the book makes this clear: *The Lives and Accomplishments of Several Heroes and Notable Men, especially Oriental and Indian, Compared after Plutarch's Method*.

One reason for disagreement regarding Holberg's conception of a hero is that he was remarkably inconsistent when he categorized a historical person as a hero or a villain. Thus in the preface to *Heroes* he categorized Aurangzeb along with Peter the Great, Catherine I and the Mogul governor Mahabat Khan as among the greatest heroes of all time, but in the actual biography Aurangzeb is depicted as a villainous deceiver.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, unlike the Danish words for hero and heroine ('helt' and 'heltinde') the Danish word for villain ('skurk') is not a part of the vocabulary of *Heroes* and *Heroines*, nor of Holberg's entire authorship in general. Instead, Holberg preferred to characterize his villains as bad examples. Just as the virtuous lives of some served as models of upright conduct, the infamous lives of others would deter people from following a similar way of life.<sup>12</sup>



Before we examine the gallery of characters in *Heroes*, we should look briefly at Holberg's view of the Oriental and Indian 'other', although his notable inconsistency on the subject makes this difficult. On the one hand, some descriptions of Oriental cultures are negative and Eurocentric, such as the depiction of the Ottoman nation as the most degenerate in the history of humankind, whose depraved morality and continuous violations of the law of nations justified every attempt to eradicate the Ottomans from the face of the earth. On the other hand, Holberg readily depicted the Moguls under the rule of Akbar as a people of sound moral values.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the concept of the other is insignificant compared to the book's overall moral project. In terms of genre, *Heroes* was itself an exemplary instance of the exemplary use of the past, a case of *historia magistra vitae*, deriving moral lessons from historical models of good and bad. Alienating the reader from the Oriental and American figures would therefore be contrary to the book's moral project. This also becomes evident in some of the comparisons, where Holberg, ignoring cultural and historical differences, paired Peter the Great with Akbar and Catherine I with Zenobia. Of course, Holberg's idea of virtue and vice may be said to be biased by a European worldview, but this does not obscure the fact that he – whether intentionally or unintentionally – erased the gap between the European and the other, prompting his readers to draw universal moral lessons from those portrayed.

### The rejection of the classical warrior hero

An ideal point of departure for examining Holberg's concept of a hero is the parallel biography of Žižka and Skanderbeg. Here Holberg not only revealed his own understanding of the true warrior hero but also rejected the classic Homeric definition:

Among many things that are misused in daily speech and writing is the title of hero or *heros*. Homer, whom poets and moralists imitate, laid the foundation for this error because he as examples of virtues and bravery in his heroic verse presented certain men, whose accomplishments and deeds rather should be buried in oblivion and whose way of life have no resemblance whatever with the true heroism. For if Achilles or Odysseus are heroes then the definition is this: a hero is a man who pillages and kills people with such a constant fortune and success that no one dares or is able to make him accountable [for his actions] but has to leave the revenge to God. Or a hero is a man who through deceit and cunning obtains riches and wealth and places himself and his country in such a state that he becomes a terror to all his neighbours.<sup>14</sup>

Holberg's attack on Homeric heroism has many similarities with other contemporary *philosophes*. The Scottish author Lord Kames, for instance,



described Achilles as a mere savage and Voltaire's main character in *Candide* was a ludicrous combination of Achilles and Odysseus.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the traditional Homeric warrior hero, Holberg's was a virtuous man who by divine providence was born to save and preserve Mankind. Hence, Holberg ironically viewed a father who had given his children a proper upbringing as more of a hero than Alexander the Great who caused so much pointless destruction and death.<sup>16</sup>

How did the portraits of Žižka and Skanderbeg fit into these categories? In essence, the parallel biography of the two warlords is a comparison of the traditional Homeric warrior hero personified by Žižka and Holberg's conception of the virtuous warrior hero personified by Skanderbeg. Both warlords were formidable strategists and performed courageously on the field of battle, but while Skanderbeg's accomplishments were commendable, Žižka's were inglorious. Skanderbeg was:

the greatest hero that nature has created and nobody past or present is his equal. For nothing was more wondrous than to see an insignificant prince with a handful of soldiers over a period of 24 years wage war with two great monarchs [Murad II and Mehmed II], who made Persia, Egypt and the whole of Europe shudder and tremble.<sup>17</sup>

Like Žižka, Skanderbeg's enemies feared him on the field of battle, but in contrast to Žižka, Skanderbeg was also revered by his enemies. This was mainly because he treated his captives with the utmost respect and mercy. Finally, yet more importantly, his quest for victory was motivated by his zeal for the preservation of Christianity. In other words, Holberg viewed Skanderbeg as Europe's bulwark against the Islamic Ottoman Empire. Žižka on the other hand exhibited a quest for revenge and blood thirst, 'which went too far and the horrific executions that occurred [by the instruction of Žižka] shows that this man inclined to cruelty, which at times led to barbarism'.<sup>18</sup>

### Sanctimonious deceivers

Whereas Žižka was Holberg's modern equivalent to Achilles, two of his other villains – the sanctimonious deceivers Muhammad and Aurangzeb – have similarities with Odysseus. Relying heavily on a French translation of the English orientalist Humphrey Prideaux' *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Display'd in the Life of Mahomet* (1697) and the third edition of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1720),<sup>19</sup> Holberg's portrayal of Muhammad was very much in accordance with contemporary European reception of the prophet of Islam. He was a hypocrite and Islam a false religious doctrine created by an ambitious man to strengthen his power and justify unjust acts of war, robberies and polygamy. In contrast, to his counterpart Zoroaster, who relied on reason when he promoted



Zoroastrianism, Muhammad's irrational behaviour and contradictory religious beliefs made Holberg hesitant whether Muhammad was a deceiver or a mere fanatic. Because of the contradictory and irrational teachings of Islam the question why this religion had such a following was begging for an answer. Holberg found a partial answer in Bayle's famous antithesis between Muslims' and Catholics' treatment of people with different religious beliefs. Contradicting their religious doctrines, Muslims practiced freedom of religion while Catholics, instead of preaching the gospel, subdued any religious deviant by force.<sup>20</sup> Hence, in the eyes of Holberg, Muslim tolerance had a far greater effect on the spread of Islam than Muhammad's teachings.

In the introduction to the parallel biography of Aurangzeb and the Egyptian sultan Saladin, Holberg proclaimed that: 'the safest though most illegal of all means to attain high worldly power is hypocrisy and a false humility'.<sup>21</sup> Besides Muhammad several notable persons had used this political stratagem to gain power, among them the Roman king Numa Pompilius, the Persian ruler Ismael Sephy and Oliver Cromwell. 'But no one has known better how to play this role than the great Mogul Aurangzeb in our time'.<sup>22</sup> From 1655 to 1660 the Mogul Empire was ravaged by a succession war between Aurangzeb, his three brothers and their father Shah Jehan in which Aurangzeb was victorious by killing his brothers and imprisoning his father. Fratricide and the dishonouring of one's father were reprehensible actions, but what made Aurangzeb also a hypocrite was that up until his anointment he maintained that his sole goal in life was a pious devotion to Islam, not the Mogul throne.

Curiously, Holberg was partially willing to exonerate Aurangzeb for the murders of his brothers:

before condemning him [Aurangzeb] we must consider the unhappy custom in Hindustan as well as several other Eastern kingdoms, that rulership often becomes the booty of the strongest. So when there are several princes each must be prepared either to play the master or die. Therefore one finds that such violence and murder should rather be ascribed to the country's bad laws than Aurangzeb's evil nature, who, if he had been a European prince, could have been regarded as a role model and mirror for regents, for he was a man with a gifted mind, a great statesman and a great king.<sup>23</sup>

This opinion was a direct translation from the French physician François Bernier in his *Voyages de François Bernier*,<sup>24</sup> whose observations on the political system were allegories of the nascent absolutist regime of Louis XIV.<sup>25</sup> Holberg was indifferent to any hidden messages in Bernier's travel account. Instead, Bernier's opinion about the Moguls' act of inheritance supported Holberg in the assumption that one had to consider cultural and historical factors when assessing vices and virtues.



## Second-rate heroes

In fact, Holberg dedicated an entire parallel biography to the subject of culture and history. In the eyes of Europeans, the virtues of the Persian ruler Shah Abas and Suleiman the Magnificent were not memorable and their achievements at best mediocre. Nevertheless, if one took into account the cultural and historical heritage of these second-rate heroes their reputation had to be reconsidered. Holberg explained that he praised a person, who was raised on the principles of Pythagoras, ‘for [his] humility and gentleness [. . .], but far more one who possesses the same virtues if he is raised among Tatarian hordes’.<sup>26</sup> One had to consider something similar when passing judgement on other people’s faults, since ‘many of these are not always equally blameworthy’.<sup>27</sup> Because of their poor upbringing and cultural heritage Holberg, therefore, admired Abas’ and Suleiman’s virtues far more than their European counterparts and was also keener to excuse their vices. Of course, not all of Abas’ and Suleiman’s vices could be excused and Holberg lambasted the two for their ill-treatment and executions of their own sons. Such acts of cruelty were inexcusable and so Holberg refrained from recommending their characters as a model for others. Nevertheless, he still acknowledged both sovereigns’ virtuous potential, and as in the case of Aurangzeb he emphasized that if Abas and Suleiman had been born in another country, they would have been ranked among the greatest monarchs in the world.<sup>28</sup>

## Tragic heroes

Did this have to be a European country? Some would probably conclude that Holberg’s attempt to improve the reputation of Abas and Suleiman reflects a Eurocentric worldview of the barbaric Orient where virtuous men and women could never fulfil their potential. There can be no doubt that Holberg regarded eighteenth-century European civilization as superior to several Oriental civilizations. However, he never implied that the superiority of European civilization was natural or necessary. Throughout history non-European societies had proven to be some of the most advanced. Furthermore, the present state of European civilization could not justify attempts to ‘civilize’ non-European societies – a point that Holberg set out to prove in the parallel biography of Montezuma and Atahualpa.

In the portrayals of Montezuma and Atahualpa it becomes obvious that Holberg was not particularly interested in the main characters of the parallel biography and in comparing their vices and virtues. Holberg himself admitted that the comparison of ‘these two American monarchs has not been regarding their achievements and natural traits, which have no similarities, but regarding their destiny’.<sup>29</sup> They were the tragic heroes whose death marked the end of two of history’s greatest empires. Both sovereigns ruled over vast and advanced kingdoms by no means inferior to European



countries. In particular, the Incan civilization was one of the most advanced in the world, making the collapse of the Incan empire even more tragic. Neither Montezuma nor Atahualpa was to blame for these tragedies. The actual culprits were the Spanish conquistadors whose justification for colonizing America – the wish to convert and civilize the barbaric Indians – as well as killing or enslaving the indigenous peoples were only hypocritical wiles. This was not the first time Holberg discussed the Spanish colonization of America. In *The Law of Nature and Nations* he had proclaimed that the colonization was in violation of the law of nations,<sup>30</sup> and one might suspect that his restatement thirty-three years later was to underscore the general point more than to express admiration for the advanced Incan civilization.

### Prelude to a criticism of *De l'esprit des loix*

The idea that climate and environment have a direct impact on people's behaviour and national character goes back to the Greek physician Hippocrates and was not new when Montesquieu published *De l'esprit des loix* in 1748, nor when Holberg nine years earlier in the parallel biography of Akbar and Peter the Great touched upon the subject. Considering its popularity, it might seem futile to compare Holberg's and Montesquieu's views on climatic determinism, but their interpretations do share some similarities albeit not their overall opinion.

By arranging the world into latitudes Montesquieu argued that the health of a people, their mores and their politics could be seen to be determined by their distance from the equator. In the northern and temperate or colder parts of the world, nations were characterized by physical and mental vitality and free governments, whereas nations of the southern and warmer parts were characterized by indolence and despotism.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to Montesquieu, Holberg's view on climatic determinism was somewhat ambiguous. In *Description of Denmark and Norway*, he asserted that because of a colder climate Norwegians in comparison with Danes were hot-tempered, addicted to drink and self-opinionated but at the same time faithful, brave and inventive – a claim he repeated twenty years later in the second edition.<sup>32</sup> In between,<sup>33</sup> and later in the introduction to the parallel biography of Akbar and Peter the Great, Holberg had a fundamentally different view:

Many imagine that just like nature gives different gifts to every human being, so it makes a whole nation unrecognizable by another through the distribution of virtues and vices; [...] Nothing is more certain than that air and food have a great effect on the human body and that the condition of the mind is mostly determined by that of the body; but this argument is not sufficient to reject the opinion of those who claim that virtues and valour arise mostly from sensible laws and good upbringing.<sup>34</sup>



It took just a single individual, an able king, preferably an absolute one, to bring a people from barbarism to enlightenment.

Peter the Great and Akbar served as prime examples. Both rulers had admittedly excelled in the art of war to expand and secure the borders of their empires, but such accomplishments were minor compared to their other achievements. Through a series of reforms that mirrored enlightened Europe, Peter managed to pull his otherwise barbaric subjects into the eighteenth century and transform the Russians into one of the most feared and respected nations of all time. Similar praise for Peter was common among contemporary *philosophes* such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Christian Wolff, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle and several others who saw the Russian tsar as the prime example of the positive effects of enlightened despotism.<sup>35</sup> Holberg took this praise a step further, regarding the tsar's coming to power and his reformatations as a sign of divine providence.<sup>36</sup>

Could anyone match Peter's achievements? Akbar had the fewest vices, Peter the most virtues, and they were largely equal, but there were differences, which Holberg could not ignore. Akbar's reforms and scientific interests were admirable but all served his self-perfection, while Peter only wished to enlighten and improve his subjects; so Akbar was the greater man, Peter the greater king. Furthermore, whereas the Russians continued to be a respected and feared nation after the tsar's death, the Moguls resumed their old and depraved way of life once Akbar passed away.<sup>37</sup>

The point that the admirable Peter's enduring reform of the Russians served to disprove Montesquieu was brought out in a late publication by Holberg. The *Remarques sur quelques positions, qui se trouvent dans l'Esprit des Loix* was mainly devoted to disputing Montesquieu's suggestion that Denmark's beneficial absolutism really was a form of despotism, but Holberg underscored his point by repeating his old argument from *Heroes* that sensible laws and good education, not climatic circumstances, determined the character of a nation. And he used the Russians' sudden transformation from a depraved to an esteemed and enlightened nation as an example.<sup>38</sup> It was with good reason that Holberg repeated what he had said in *Heroes*. However, Holberg and Montesquieu shared more than the theme of climate and politics. Montesquieu relied heavily on the French jeweller and traveller Jean Chardin's *Journal du voyage du Chevalier Chardin en Perse & aux Indes Orientales, par la Mer Noire & par la Colchide* when he pieced together his theory on climatic determinism. Bernier's as well as the French gem merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's travel accounts also provided important material to Montesquieu's theory.<sup>39</sup> Holberg had himself made extensive use of all these travel accounts in several of his biographies (Aurangzeb, Shah Abas, Akbar, Mahabat Khan and Mir Jumla II).<sup>40</sup> It is likely that Holberg recognized Chardin's theory, when he read *De l'esprit des loix*, suggesting a repetition of his former objections against climatic determinism.



## The true philosopher

One of the most important of the twelve parallel biographies is the comparison between Socrates and Epaminondas. In the introduction, Holberg presented the readers with a checklist of fourteen characteristics that defined a true philosopher:

thorough learning, control over his passions, proper [social] behaviour, desire to help his neighbour, diligence in the search for truth, openness in conveying the same, dignity without affectation, self-knowledge, little desire after worldly and vain honour, and satisfaction with his [social] status and conditions, neither to despise wealth and money nor to worship them, no high opinion of his own person, compassion with the erring, care for his own life and wellbeing, no untimely desire after death nor fear of its coming so that his maxim in that regard should be: *Nec cupio, nec metuo* [I have no desire, I have no fear]. Love of his country and obedience to the authorities, patience in suffering and forgiveness of injustice, constancy without obstinacy and other similar qualities.<sup>41</sup>

Holberg did not rate the characteristics, but the Socratic injunction to ‘know thyself’ was a focal point in his moral authorship.

Both Socrates and Epaminondas fulfilled all fourteen criteria. Whereas Epaminondas accomplished this because of his natural traits, Socrates had taught himself to live in accordance with the fourteen characteristics and since ‘it is more commendable to reach safe haven in storm and bad weather than in fair,’<sup>42</sup> Holberg favoured Socrates. Socrates’ life was even more admirable because it ‘was a constant encouragement to virtue and proficiency. It is in this that he is not only greater than Epaminondas but also every other philosopher’.<sup>43</sup> Epaminondas however not only excelled as a philosopher. He was also a merciful warrior hero like Scanderbeg and a ruler like Peter the Great or Akbar who could lift his subjects from barbarism to enlightenment.

Holberg also held patriotic love and obedience in high regard. He elaborated this in the parallel biography of the Mogul governors Mahabat Khan and Mir Jumla II. Both were formidable warlords but whereas the latter was driven by ambition and wealth, the former (the hero) was the perfect civil servant whose apparently unconditional obedience to the treacherous Mogul emperor Jahangir was in fact rather in the service of the Mogul Empire’s preservation.<sup>44</sup>

## Holberg’s heroines

When we turn to the companion volume to *Heroes*, the *Lives of Heroines*, we get some elaboration of Holberg’s rejection of environmental determinism.



In the moral introduction to the parallel biography of Zenobia and Catherine I, Holberg presented one of his favourite objections to the conception that women were unfit for public office and education because of their natural inferiority to men. Just as climate did not determine the virtues of a nation, so women's virtues were not determined by nature but by education and culturally defined gender roles. Intellectual gifts were distributed equally to both sexes, and therefore Holberg argued that women could, if given the opportunity, excel in education and office just as well as men.<sup>45</sup>

Catherine I was an ideal example. The tsarina inherited the throne from Peter the Great and succeeded in preserving the legacy of her late consort by attracting European intellectuals to the university in St. Petersburg, improving an already formidable navy and organising scientific as well as commercial explorations. Her only major flaw was the alliance with her son-in-law Charles Frederick, Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, whose claim to the Danish parts of Schleswig, made Catherine a dangerous enemy of the Danish king Frederick IV and caused unnecessary unrest in Europe. Despite this, Holberg was willing to rank her as the greatest queen of all time,<sup>46</sup> for while Zenobia was one of the greatest women in history Catherine had:

no equal, for no matter how many pages of history we turn, we will hardly find a poor virgin without either noble birth or beauty who became the wife of a great monarch, who succeeded him, notwithstanding male heirs, who by testament ordained her own heirs, reigned over a mighty foreign country [. . .] and finally died quietly in her sickbed.<sup>47</sup>

In essence, Catherine was the prime example of women's true potential. Given her social status and upbringing as well as her unattractive appearance, her life was extraordinary. Her luck was that Peter discovered her formidable character and gave her the opportunity to put it to good use.

It was not the first time Holberg advocated women's capabilities. Both the mock-heroic epic *Peder Paars* and the satirical poem *Zille Hans-daughter's Gynaicologia or Defense of Womankind* contain similar arguments concerning women's opportunities to study and hold offices on par with men and he repeated these in the fictional travel account *Niels Klim's Travels Underground*.<sup>48</sup> Scholars have wondered where Holberg got these notions. Some have drawn a direct link between Holberg's view of women and Cartesian dualism without offering any evidence for these assumptions.<sup>49</sup> One study has even attempted to show a close relationship between *Zille Hans-daughter's Gynaicologia* and the radical Cartesian François Poullain de la Barre's feminist treatises,<sup>50</sup> but clear evidence is lacking. Probably the search for a single, preferably radical source of inspiration is misguided, for Holberg's view of women was shared by several of his contemporaries, and it is difficult to identify his sources of inspiration since there are so many to choose from. One example is the French historian Jean Rousset de Missy's *Memoires du regne de Catherine, imperatrice & souveraine de toute la*



*Russie &c. &c. &c.* (1728), on which Holberg based his entire portrayal of Catherine I. Rousset de Missy began his biography with a general discussion of the differences between male and female abilities, objecting like Holberg to the idea that women were naturally inferior. Women like Catherine I and other historical heroines had throughout time proven that women were capable of excelling at even the highest offices.<sup>51</sup>

One should also hesitate to call Holberg an early modern feminist,<sup>52</sup> for his advocacy of women's opportunities was not a matter of equal rights. Rather his concern was that a person's abilities should be allowed to flourish for the improvement of the society and the most suited person whether man or woman should be able to hold any office. In other words, his support for equality was not so much emancipatory as it was meritocratic.

### The lack of heroines in *Heroines*

When examining Holberg's views on women, scholars usually rely on the above-mentioned writings, while *Heroines* has received little attention. There may be several reasons for this. First, *Heroines* does not contain that many heroines. As with *Heroes*, Holberg thought that he could derive important moral points from persons who may have been notable but not heroic. He may have taken this notion one step further in *Heroines* because of his development as an author between 1739 and 1745. Although many of his earlier works contain moral reflections, *Heroes* seems to mark a turning point in his literary career, where he took the decisive step from pragmatic historian to moral philosopher. Via *Niels Klim* (1741) and *Moral Reflections* (1744) the transformation was complete with *Heroines* in 1745 when Holberg's interest and confidence in creating moral introductions had risen significantly.<sup>53</sup> This also seems to have caused a shift in interests. In *Heroes* the lives were the main interest with moral reflections appended, in *Heroines* the biographies much more strictly supported the opinions put forward in the moral introductions, resulting occasionally in some very short biographies, such as the parallel one of the Judean princess Berenice and queen Margaret of France, where the life of the capricious Berenice got seven pages.<sup>54</sup> Another example is the parallel biography between Anne Marie Louise d'Orléans, Duchess of Montpensier, and Hortense Mancini. In the comparison Holberg admitted that the two women had no comparable traits, and the only reason for comparing them was their tragic albeit different fates. Whereas d'Orleans' family prevented her from marrying the man she truly loved, Mancini was forced to marry a man she despised. Their lives confirmed Holberg's assumption in the introduction that marriage should be consensual not forced. Matrimony was also a topic in the parallel biography of Lady Jane Grey and the daughter of the Danish king Christian IV, Leonora Christina Ulfeldt. Both women were gifted intellectuals and showed potential for a virtuous and exemplary life, but instead their lives ended tragically. Neither Jane nor Leonora Christina were directly to blame



for their unfortunate destiny, their lives being shaped by their marriages. The academically talented Jane unwillingly became the queen of England because of her father in law's ambitions, which ultimately resulted in her execution. Leonora Christina was another matter. Much of her dubious behaviour might be attributed to her husband Corfitz Ulfeldt, but Holberg still suspected that her ambitious character made her an accomplice to her husband's crimes.<sup>55</sup>

Another reason for the scholarly neglect of *Heroines* may be that many of the women portrayed were subjected to harsh criticism. This becomes apparent in the parallel biography of Cleopatra and Anne Boleyn, whom Holberg compared in order to discuss women's ability to manipulate men. Their efforts had very different results. Using sexual allure Cleopatra was able to win Mark Antony's heart, while Anne's attempt to use coldness towards Henry VIII only resulted in her execution. Holberg did not think much of Anne, but he still sympathized with her tragic fate. In the case of Cleopatra, he opposed Plutarch's characterization of her as a monster while acknowledging her beauty and intellectual capabilities. However, such virtues were not enough to outweigh her many vices (namely her unchaste behaviour).<sup>56</sup> Another example is the parallel biography of Mary Stuart and Christina of Sweden. These women exhibited what Holberg termed a reversed life showing a virtuous potential in their adolescence only to become morally corrupt with age.<sup>57</sup>

*Heroines* does not support the simple image of Holberg as the happy feminist; he refrained from preferring one sex over the other and depicted women's and men's lives and accomplishments with truthful sincerity.<sup>58</sup> Women like men would have to face criticism if the two sexes were to be measured by the same standards, and therefore he did not hesitate to haul the heroines or notable women over the coals if he deemed their actions immoral. Still, not all those portrayed were merely notable; some were heroines and gave positive proof that women had the same abilities as men. Did women then possess any virtues or vices strictly preserved for the female gender?

### Nearly flawless rulers and old yet astute women

Once again, Holberg returned to the subject of the great rulers. This time the historical examples came from England, Elizabeth I, and Denmark, Margaret I, founder of The Kalmar Union. In *Heroes*, Holberg had established 'that Akbar had the least vices, Peter the most virtues'<sup>59</sup> and subsequently favoured the tsar. Hence, one would suspect that Holberg preferred Elizabeth to Margaret, since the first was the most virtuous while the latter had the fewest vices.<sup>60</sup> However, this was not the case. In the comparison Holberg was well aware that Elizabeth's achievements were superior to Margaret's, yet he attempted to prove the opposite. He presented the reader with counterfactual arguments whenever Elizabeth appeared to be



the greater ruler. When it came to the promotion of shipbuilding and commercial enterprises as well as the establishment of new colonies, Elizabeth outshone Margaret as well as every other regent in history. But there was a reason for Margaret's inferiority: 'Queen Margaret's failure to undertake something similar should rather be attributed to the times and the lack of opportunity rather than the person, for in the art of governing she was virtually Elizabeth's equal'.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Holberg, once again, argued that cultural and historical heritage was a factor to consider when comparing the two queens. While Elizabeth lived in a time when princesses received an education in politics, philosophy, language and morals similar to their male counterparts, Margaret lived in a barbaric period and had a poor upbringing. One specific action in Elizabeth's reign played a decisive role in Holberg's concluding comparison. Although not very fond of Elizabeth's bitter rival, the Scottish queen Mary Stuart, Holberg was a strong critic of Elizabeth's erratic behaviour, which eventually led to the execution of Mary. In fact, he saw Elizabeth's involvement in the execution of Mary Stuart as so controversial that he in the biography of Mary herself finished the portrayal with a further judgement about Elizabeth's deception instead of the usual characterization.<sup>62</sup> Against this background it may not be surprising that Elizabeth's actions towards Mary tipped the balance in favour of Margaret, who like her counterpart made questionable choices yet not as reprehensible.

It is reasonable to suspect that Holberg favoured Margaret because of his loyalty to the contemporary national and absolutist attitudes in Denmark-Norway. We find a similar loyalty in the portrayal of Christian II in the *History of Denmark*, where Holberg used narrative and discursive elements to reconsider the traditional (mainly Swedish) view of Christian as a blood-thirsty tyrant. As the founder of the Kalmar Union Margaret was of course not a controversial historical figure like Christian, but still made some questionable actions, especially in her treatment of the Swedish subjects. Holberg's account of these dealings is somewhat panegyric, as the Swedish publisher Carl Christopher Gjörwell, emphasized, just as the anonymous Swedish translator of *Heroines* found it necessary to point out that the description of Margaret's treatment of the Swedes was Holberg's adaptation of the truth.<sup>63</sup> However, Holberg's praise of Margaret did not extend to every Danish sovereign from the Middle Ages. One example was Margaret's successor Eric of Pomerania, who never managed to carry on where his predecessor had left off.<sup>64</sup>

Like Christian II, Holberg had a high opinion of the king's counsellor Sigbrit Villoms and also of the Ottoman Kösem Sultan. Their lives proved two important moral points. First, while upbringing and education played an important role in the development of a person's character – a point Holberg elaborated in the parallel biography of Mary I and Mary II<sup>65</sup> – virtues could not be taught. Despite his firm belief in the effects of education and sensible legislation, he thought that the vices and virtues of a person



were predetermined from birth. Once again, Socrates' aphorism 'know thyself' played an important role. Virtues could not be taught unless they lay dormant in a person. Instead, a person's inherent virtues needed to be cultivated in order for them to flourish. It is interesting to notice how Holberg here deviated from the Pufendorbian personae by asserting an Aristotelian natural morality.<sup>66</sup> This was not an isolated case. In several places we find similar arguments stressing that vices and virtues were naturally determined.<sup>67</sup> Second, Holberg rejected the common idea that old women were superfluous human beings. Both Sigbrit and Kösem excelled in old age, the former as a counsellor to Christian II, the latter as an official and informal ruler of the vast Ottoman Empire.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that Holberg was a hero-worshipper. However, he did not present a conventional definition of a true hero. Instead, he disputed the classic Homeric hero figure and presented a series of different types of hero as well as villain. Heroes could excel as gracious warlords (Skanderbeg), nearly flawless statesmen (Peter the Great and Akbar), true philosophers (Socrates) and obedient subjects (Mahabat Khan), while the villains were sanctimonious deceivers (Aurangzeb or Muhammad and merciless avengers (Žižka). Heroes could also possess vices, and villains virtues, and their attributes were assessed in relation to their cultural and historical heritage. Furthermore, in line with his overall view of women's position in society, Holberg argued that women possessed virtues and vices just like men, enabling some to become intellectuals (Lady Jane Grey and Leonora Christina Ulfeldt) and nearly flawless statesmen (Catherine I, Elizabeth and Margaret), disposing others to become power hungry sexual predators (Cleopatra) or otherwise corrupt (Mary Stuart).

Not all of the portrayed can be categorized as heroes or villains. In keeping with the tradition of *historia magistra vitae*, several of the portrayed were 'merely' men or women whose lives served to illustrate a moral point in the parallel biographies. Hence, the exemplary use of the past permeated both *Heroes* and *Heroines*.

*Heroes* and *Heroines* mark the beginning and completion of a literary turn in Holberg's later career. With *Heroes*, the historian Holberg attempted to write as a moralist. It is obvious that he was cautious in this endeavour and thus like Plutarch he primarily focused on assessing and comparing the vices and virtues of the portrayed. His cautiousness soon changed and thus *Heroines* was the work of an experienced and confident moralist, who chose to focus on the moral introduction rather than the historical biographies and the comparisons. *Heroes* then anticipated Holberg as a moralist, and we can only agree with him, when he later categorized his two Plutarchian imitations as belonging to the moral authorship and not the historical.<sup>69</sup>



## Notes

- 1 The central studies are Anne Eriksen and Anne Birgitte Rønning, 'Eksemplarisk statskunst og mangfoldig kvinneliv i Ludvig Holbergs heltinnehistorier', in *Eksempels makt: Kjønn, representasjon og autoritet fra antikken til i dag*, ed. Anne Eriksen et al (Oslo: 2012), 113–145; Kristoffer Schmidt, 'Helte, skurke eller bare berømmelige? Et nyt blik på Ludvig Holbergs Heltehistorier', in *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg*, ed. Jørgen Magnus Sejersted and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen (Oslo: 2014), 303–321; Heinrich Anz, 'Die Vernunft der Alterität. Der Umgang mit dem Fremden in Ludwig Holbergs Heldengeschichten', *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik A*: 78 (2007): 209–218. Studies written in English are scarce. In Norman L. Willey, 'Holberg and Mexico', *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters* 24 (1939): 123–130, Holberg's source material for the biography of Montezuma is revealed. Furthermore, *Heroes* is touched upon in Torben Damsholt, 'Ludvig Holberg and Greek-Roman Antiquity', in *Ludvig Holberg: A European Writer: A Study in Influence and Reception*, ed. Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam: 1994): 42–66.
- 2 For a short historiographical review of these differences see: Schmidt, 'Helte, skurke', 303–308.
- 3 Anne E. Jensen, *Holberg og kvinderne eller et forsvar for ligeretten* (Copenhagen: 1984), 186–207; Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, 'Holberg's Apology for Zenobia of Palmyra and Catherine I', *Scandinavica*, 36, (1997): 169–188.
- 4 Two exceptions are Jensen, *Holberg og kvinderne*, 186–207; Eriksen and Rønning, 'Eksemplarisk statskunst', 113–145.
- 5 Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives* (New York: 1914–26). Cf. F. J. Billeskov Jansen, *Holberg som Epigrammatiker og Essayist* (Copenhagen: 1938–9), II 38.
- 6 Antoine Varillas, *Histoire de François Premier* (Paris: 1685), i–cii; Antoine Varillas, *Histoire de Louis Onze* (Paris: 1689), II 358–438.
- 7 René Rapin, *Les Oeuvres du P. Rapin* (Amsterdam: 1709), I 2r–9v.
- 8 Ludvig Holberg, *Adskillige store Heltes og berømmelige Mænds, sær Orientalske og Indianske sammenlignede Historier og Bedrifter efter Plutarchi Maade* (Copenhagen: 1739), 4r.
- 9 Sigurd Høst, *Om Holbergs historiske skrifter* (Bergen: 1913), 149.
- 10 *Dannemarks Riges Historie* (Copenhagen: 1732–5), II 918–920, III 698–700.
- 11 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I 3r–3v, 87–153, 186–188.
- 12 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 4r–4v. Plutarch used a similar explanation for including a parallel biography of Demetrius I of Macedon and Mark Antony in *Vitae Parallelae*.
- 13 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 196–250.
- 14 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 325–326.
- 15 Donald Foerster, 'Mid-Eighteenth century Scotch criticism of Homer', *Studies in Philology*, 40 (1943): 430; Carl A. Rubin, 'The obsolescence of the hero: Voltaire's attack on Homeric heroism', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 29 (1994): 85–94.
- 16 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 330.
- 17 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 384.
- 18 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 347.
- 19 Leiv Amundsen, 'Om Helte-historiernes tilblivelse. Holbergs bruk av litterære kilder' in *Holberg Aarbog*, ed. Francis Bull and Carl S. Petersen (Copenhagen: 1925), 7–30; Billeskov Jansen, *Holberg som Epigrammatiker*, II, 33.
- 20 *Adskillige store Heltes*, II, 105–106; Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (Rotterdam: 1720), III, 1859 nAA.
- 21 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 83.
- 22 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 86.
- 23 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 135.



- 24 Kristoffer Schmidt, 'Ludvig Holbergs *Heltehistorier* – mellem moralfilosofi og historie', (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen: 2015), 63–67.
- 25 Sylvia Murr, 'Le politique 'au Mogol' selon Bernier: appareil conceptuel, rhétorique stratégique, philosophie morale', *Purusartha*, 13 (1990): 239–311; Stanley J. Tambiah, 'What did Bernier actually say? Profiling the Mughal empire', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 32 (1998): 361–386; Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford: 2009), 133.
- 26 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 388.
- 27 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 389.
- 28 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 486.
- 29 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 574.
- 30 Kristoffer Schmidt, 'Holbergs naturretslige og historiske syn på spaniernes kolonisering af Amerika', in *Ludvig Holbergs Naturrett*, ed. Eiliv Vinje and Jørgen Magnus Sejersted (Oslo: 2012), 140–158.
- 31 Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des loix* (Genève: 1748), I, 360–443.
- 32 *Danmarks og Norges Beskrivelse* (Copenhagen: 1729), 20, 22–25. *Dannemarks og Norges Geistlige og Verdslige Staat* (Copenhagen: 1749), 20, 22–25.
- 33 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, I, 123.
- 34 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 189–190.
- 35 Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford: 2008), 295–309.
- 36 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 320–321.
- 37 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 322–323.
- 38 *Remarques sur quelques positions, qui se trouvent dans l'Esprit des Loix* (Copenhagen: 1753), Lettre 516 au même.
- 39 Muriel Dodds, *Les récits de voyages: sources de L'esprit des lois de Montesquieu* (Paris: 1929), 55–56. Montesquieu's knowledge of Chardin might be attributed to Abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos.
- 40 Schmidt, 'Ludvig Holbergs *Heltehistorier*', 63–63, 72–78, 95–102 133–136.
- 41 *Adskillige store Heltes*, II, 449–450.
- 42 *Adskillige store Heltes*, II, 572.
- 43 *Adskillige store Heltes*, II, 573.
- 44 *Adskillige store Heltes*, II, 255, 281–282.
- 45 For a detailed examination and English translation of the moral introduction see Straubhaar, 'Holberg's Apology', 176–182.
- 46 *Adskillige store Heltes*, II, 136–154.
- 47 *Adskillige store Heltes*, II, 154.
- 48 Cf. chapter 6
- 49 Jensen, *Holberg og kvinderne*, 70–72; Ingeborg W. Owesen, 'Ludvig Holberg – en tidligmoderne feminist', *Norsk Filosofisk tidsskrift* 45 (2010): 40–54. For a different philosophical context, see the Introduction, 14.
- 50 Pål Bjørby, '"En vis Skribent": F. Poulain de la Barre (1647–1723) og hans tre cartesianske forsvar for kvinnen som hovedkilden til "feminismen" i L. Holbergs dikt "Zille Hans Dotters Gynaicologia" (1722)', *Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning* 3 (2014): 222–240.
- 51 Schmidt, 'Ludvig Holbergs *Heltehistorier*', 126–128.
- 52 For example, Owesen, 'Ludvig Holberg', 40–54.
- 53 Jansen, *Holberg som Epigrammatiker*, II, 45.
- 54 *Adskillige Heltinders Og Navnkundige Damers Sammenlignede Historier Efter Plutarchi Maade* (Copenhagen: 1745), II, 295–302.
- 55 *Adskillige Heltinders*, II, 55.
- 56 *Adskillige Heltinders*, I, 233–234, 256–260.
- 57 *Adskillige Heltinders*, II, 110–122.
- 58 *Adskillige Heltinders*, I, 2r.



- 59 *Adskillige store Heltes*, I, 323.
- 60 *Adskillige Heltinders*, I, 114.
- 61 *Adskillige Heltinders*, I, 111.
- 62 *Adskillige Heltinders*, II, 176–177.
- 63 Carl Christopher Gjörwell, *Bref Om Blandade Ämnen* (Stockholm: 1754), 46; Ludvig Holberg, *Samling Af Namnkunniga Damers Lefwernes-Beskrifningar* (Stockholm: 1780–4), I, 24.
- 64 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, I, 611–616.
- 65 *Adskillige Heltinders*, II, 56–110.
- 66 Cf. Chapter 3; Chapter 4; and Chapter 6.
- 67 For instance, *Moralske Tanker* (Copenhagen: 1744), II, 381–389.
- 68 *Adskillige Heltinders*, II, 261–318.
- 69 *Epistler, Befattende Adskillige historiske, politiske, metaphysiske, moralske, philosophiske, Item Skiemstsomme Materier* (Copenhagen: 1748–54), I, 3r–3v.



## 6 Journeys of humour and satire: *Peder Paars* and *Niels Klim*

*Karen Skovgaard-Petersen*

Among Holberg's voluminous literary output are two fictional travel accounts, written with an interval of approximately twenty years; the epic poem *Peder Paars* (1719–20), which he wrote in Danish, and the Latin prose novel *Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum* (1741) (*Niels Klim's Travels Underground*). Both bear witness to Holberg's literary ambitions and satirical talents and to his strong engagement in the society he lived in.

A comparison of these two texts invites consideration of Holberg's relationship to classical – Greek-Roman – learning and literature. On the one hand, both texts are highly intertextual. Holberg's deep familiarity with classical, particularly Roman, literature is apparent on every page. On the other hand, both texts in different ways challenge the classical canon. *Peder Paars* is a full-blown parody of the classical epics while *Niels Klim* raises concerns about the ideological implications of Roman power as represented in the *Aeneid*.

Holberg's somewhat complex attitude towards the classical heritage reflects a general problem of early Enlightenment literature, how and to what extent should or could literary works from Greek-Roman antiquity serve as models for modern literature? This was one aspect of the so-called *Querelle des Anciens et Modernes* (the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns), which was at its most ardent in the decades around 1700. Generally, the 'Ancients' in the *Querelle* would claim the superiority of classical literature, philosophy, art and drama over modern literature etc., whereas the 'Moderns' would argue that the present age surpassed all previous ones. By Holberg's time the polarized phase of the debate had faded and a consensus on a middle position had been reached, a position that recognized modern standpoints as well as their basis in classical literature and philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Holberg himself represents such a middle position. Conducting a constant dialogue with classical literature throughout his writings, he insists that any study of classical antiquity must be useful and take modern realities as a point of departure. Recognizing progress in terms of cultural refinement and taste, he insists that human morality is unchanging.<sup>2</sup>



## *Peder Paars*

With the epic poem *Peder Paars*, Holberg had his debut as author of fiction. Behind him lay his vernacular textbooks, *Introduction to the History of European Nations*, *Supplement to the Historical Introduction* and *Introduction to the Law of Nature and Nations* and his Latin polemics with the historian Andreas Hojer in 1719, a dispute which – as he himself explains in his autobiography – contributed to make him realize his own talent for satirical writing.<sup>3</sup>

*Peder Paars* has an interesting and somewhat complicated publication history. It consists of four books, the first of which appeared in the autumn of 1719. Book two followed about six months later, book three in the summer of 1720. All three of them were printed without year of publication. Finally, in late 1720, the fourth book was published together with the preceding three in one volume. This edition, therefore, is the first edition of the entire text. On the title page, however, Holberg called it the third and thereby referred not only to the editions of the individual books as the first edition, but also sarcastically to a pirated edition of books 1–3 as the second edition. This ‘third edition’ was not only enlarged with the new fourth book, it was also supplied with extensive notes accompanying the poem throughout, with 148 new lines at the beginning of the third book and with two new prefaces. These notes and prefaces are important and interesting for Holberg’s style and purpose, so I take my point of departure in the final version, the ‘third edition’.

Holberg has constructed a double system of narrators in *Peder Paars*. The author of the poem appears to be one ‘Hans Mickelsen’, brewer in Kalundborg (a town on the West coast of Zealand), who is also the pretended author of the first preface. The poem is accompanied by commentaries in the form of footnotes, allegedly written by the learned ‘Just Justesen’, who also appears as author of the second preface. Holberg’s own name does not figure in any of the separately published parts nor in the first edition of the entire text (the ‘Third Edition’) but his authorship was apparently no secret.

Holberg was clearly fond of the odd couple, the naïve poet and brewer Hans Mickelsen and his learned editor Just Justesen. After their first appearance in *Peder Paars*, Holberg re-used them in his subsequent fictional writings of the 1720s; the satirical poems (*Skientedigte* 1721–2), his comedies (1723–5) and his *Metamorphosis* (1726). It is only in *Peder Paars*, however, that he has made Justesen accompany the text with extensive commentaries.

## Résumé

The poem consists of 6,249 verse lines divided into four books. The events allegedly take place in 1608, ‘three years before the war of Kalmar’, that is, the war between Denmark and Sweden 1611–13. *Peder Paars* is fundamentally a



parody of the classical epics, first and foremost the *Aeneid*. Mobilizing the grand epic apparatus – invocation of the Muse, similes, catalogues, classical gods in conflict with each other and supporting and opposing the hero etc. – and written in alexandrine verse (the early modern equivalent of classical hexameters) it tells of the adventures of the small merchant Peder Paars, who sets out on a voyage from one provincial town to another, from Kalundborg to Aarhus (in Eastern Jutland), in order to visit his fiancée Dorothea. Hit by a storm set in motion by the goddess of Envy who opposes Paars' happy love, they are cast ashore on the small island of Anholt. A local stranger informs them about the society of Anholt, but Peder Paars does not trust him and decides to start a battle. After a brief fight they agree to make peace. The goddess Envy now inflames the local bailiff against him and he is taken prisoner. The goddess of love, Venus, however, sees to it that the bailiff's daughter, Nille, falls in love with Paars in order to secure his rescue.

But first (at the beginning of Book 2) another war seems to threaten the small society, occasioned by Paars' servant Per Ruus who breaks wind in his sleep. Paars wakes up and misinterprets the sound as a sign of imminent war, and as the old woman Gunnild sees him from outside raging ready to fight, she concludes that the Turk is now attacking Anholt. The bailiff believes her but the barber-surgeon Jens Block does not, and consequently she accuses Block of being a traitor in Turkish service. Finally, the confusion is cleared up.

Book 3 also takes place on Anholt. Most of it is devoted to the story of young Nille's passionate but unrequited love for Peder Paars. A main character in this story is Nille's resourceful maid, Marthe (a prototype of similar shrewd maid servants in Holberg's comedies), who is instigated by Venus to organize the building of a new ship for Paars and his men. Again Envy opposes their plans. Through Morpheus, the god of sleep, she sees to it that the men on board fall asleep, leaving the ship to go badly off course. At the beginning of Book 4 they reach Skagen, the Northern-most point of Jutland, some 150 north of Aarhus where Dorothea lives. Most of the remaining part of the story takes place in Skagen where Paars narrowly escapes being enrolled in the army, and the story ends before Paars and Dorothea are united.

The plot is deliberately rather thin and uneventful, but material is added by plenty of long digressions and speeches. Into some of these digressions other digressions are sometimes interwoven, and into one speech another speech is inserted.<sup>4</sup> Thus – to mention a few examples – in Book 1, when the goddess Envy needs help from Discordia, the goddess of Conflict, her present task at the University of Copenhagen is described in detail: She has managed to start a violent fight between the professors over a detail in Homer's *Odyssey*. In Book 3 the portrait of the intelligent and energetic maid Marthe, who is the brain behind Paars' escape from Anholt, occasions a long argument in favour of women's equal access to study. And in Book 4 the host at the inn in Skagen portrays the local *Satyricus*





Figure 6.1 Holberg's mock-epic *Peder Paars* has been illustrated several times and one of the most frequently depicted scenes is the 'epic' battle between the barber-surgeon Jens Block and the old, invalid maid and witch Gunnild in the Bailiff's courtyard (book 2, song 3). The fight ended when Block in desperation grasped her cat by the tail and hit her on the head so that she stumbled into a drain and lost her crutches. Engraving by Johann Friedrich Clemens after design by Johannes Wiedewelt for the illustrated edition of *Peder Paars* (Copenhagen: 1772). Photo: Kristoffer Schmidt.



(Holberg's alter-ego) by giving a detailed account of the favourite themes of his satirical writings, among them the futile activities of the so-called cranks, *projektmagere* (in German, *Projectmacher*). And there is more of the same sort.

### A mock-epic

Virgil's Roman epic, the *Aeneid*, occupies a central role as model and frame of reference in *Peder Paars*. Written in the years following Augustus' establishment of sovereign power in Rome in the first century BC, the *Aeneid* celebrates the Roman Empire as supreme ruler of other nations by telling how Augustus' distant ancestor Aeneas laid the foundation of the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, Virgil's epic not only enjoyed status as 'master poem', it also became a model for the presentation of sovereign power. Innumerable celebrations of contemporary rulers were written in more or less close adherence to the tradition of the *Aeneid*.

Holberg's approach to the *Aeneid* is different. *Peder Paars* is a mock-epic, a parody. Echoes of the *Aeneid* are heard throughout – in verbal details and in the use of standard epic features, as well as in the overall composition. The heroic world of the *Aeneid* is projected down onto Danish provincial everyday life. Carthage and Rome are transformed into Anholt and Aarhus, Aeneas and Dido appear as Paars and Nille, and this clash between the high pathos of the Roman epic and the parochial and provincial places and events to which it is applied, constitutes the fundamental source of comedy in the poem.

The *Aeneid* is present from the very beginning, when Hans Mickelsen, the poet-narrator, briefly sums up the story to be told, invokes the muse and asks the goddess of Envy, *Avind*, about her motives for opposing the hero Peder Paars. It soon turns out that two goddesses fight over Paars – Envy who is jealous of Paars's love and Venus who, of course, supports it. This introduction is closely modelled on the first verses of the *Aeneid*. The conflict in itself mirrors the conflict between Juno and Venus in the *Aeneid* – Venus who likewise helps the hero Aeneas, and Juno who opposes him and the grand mission he is destined to carry out, laying the foundation for the future Rome.

The action of the first book is modelled on scenes from the *Aeneid*. Not only do both Aeneas and Peder Paars suffer shipwreck and become cast ashore in unknown territory, the storm that causes the shipwreck is in both cases set in motion by the god of winds, Aeolus, who is acting on order from the inimical goddess, Juno and Envy, respectively.

Once Paars and his men have made peace with the local inhabitants of Anholt, Envy realises that things are going Paars' way. In an attempt to hinder his success, she incites the bailiff against Paars, pointing out that Paars is a threat to his power. This scene is an imitation of *Aeneid* 7 when Aeneas has arrived in Latium, and his enemy among the gods, Juno, through



the fury Allecto, inflames first the local queen, Amata, and later the most eminent local warrior, Turnus, with anger against Aeneas. Their rising wrath is described in two similes – a top setting in motion and water beginning to boil – and these same similes recur in the description of the local administrator's fury in *Peder Paars* (I 4, 210–220). His wife and daughter try to persuade him to refrain from fighting against Paars, but in vain, and his stubborn decision is compared to a tree swaying in a storm, but not falling (I 5, 149–156), a simile borrowed from the description of Aeneas' resistance to Dido's prayers.

Later Nille is established as a parallel to Dido, the queen of Carthage, who rescues Aeneas and his men and then falls in love with Aeneas. Venus sends her son Cupido to inflame Nille with love for Paars (I 5), just as in the *Aeneid* 1 where Cupido, on Venus' order, makes Dido fall in love with the newcomer Aeneas. She (with her mother) asks Paars – now prisoner – to relate his adventures, just like Dido in *Aeneid* 2 and 3 listens to Aeneas narrating the fall of Troy and their wanderings. Like Dido, Nille offers to help Paars out of prison, trying to tempt him to stay (III 1–2), and later she is furious when she discovers his escape from the island. The parallel is obvious and accentuates the comic contrast between the tragic Queen of Carthage and the naïve, Danish girl who falls in love and loses her usual, healthy appetite for her daily porridge with milk.

A traditional feature of the classical epic is the catalogue. This is a list of – for instance – participants in a battle, often introduced by the poet's invocation of the muse for help. Likewise, in *Peder Paars*, but again with a twist. The catalogues here are concerned with trivia, such as all the stuff saved from the shipwreck, the different kinds of food Nille gives Paars, Paars' various shoes and clothes – and the poet, Hans Mickelsen, duly turns to the muse for divine inspiration to list these things.

With its cheerful and irreverent treatment of the *Aeneid* and the classical epic tradition, *Peder Paars* differs markedly from the dominant attitude towards the classical models since the Renaissance. But Holberg was by no means the first to parody the *Aeneid*. Ever since the Renaissance (and with roots in late antiquity) a comic branch of epic poetry had gained ground, with Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* as an early and famous instance. This trend was strong in England in the early eighteenth century. It drew inspiration from France, in particular from Boileau's *Le Lutrin*.<sup>5</sup>

It is reasonable to see *Peder Paars* as Holberg's attempt to write a Danish mock epic in the tradition from French and English models. Indeed, he himself, many years later, characterized *Peder Paars* as a Danish parallel to the French poem *Le Lutrin* and the English *Hudibras*:

The most polished nations take pride in certain poems, like the French in their *Lutrin* and the English in their *Hudibras*. In order to show what could be produced in this kind of writing here, the well-known poem entitled *Peder Paars* has been written.<sup>6</sup>



The extent to which Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* (1663–78) influenced *Peder Paars* has not, as far as I know, been investigated. But there can be little doubt that Boileau's poem was an important inspiration for Holberg, beginning already on the title page where he terms his poem a *poema heroico-comicum*, just as Boileau (in editions from 1698 onwards) had *Le Lutrin* presented as a *poème héroï-comique*.<sup>7</sup> Holberg himself states, in Justesen's introduction, that a certain episode in the first book of *Peder Paars* – the previously mentioned 'battle of books' at the University of Copenhagen, instigated by the goddess Discordia (I 3, 53ff)<sup>8</sup> – is borrowed from *Le Lutrin*.<sup>9</sup> Other borrowings from Boileau have also been detected.<sup>10</sup> But the fundamental inspiration lies in Boileau's choice of a mundane, non-heroic subject for his poem, a fight over where to place a lectern in a chapel, producing a comic effect in the incongruity between matter and style, the clash between the simple events and the grand epic apparatus with its solemn connotations.

It appears from Holberg's statement quoted above that he regarded *Peder Paars* as a Danish pendant to *Hudibras* and *Le Lutrin*. This is an indication of the task he had set for himself, to produce literature in Danish that could match contemporary foreign vernacular literature. In this context it is also worth noticing that as a parody of classical epic the mock-epic had the prestige of being polite literature.

### Hans Mickelsen – a truthful historian

Classical epic is not the only object of Holberg's satire in *Peder Paars*. Another prestigious branch of literature, history, is also parodied.

In his preface Hans Mickelsen has taken pains to list and present the sources on which he builds – all of them blatantly fictive: A chronicle of Kalundborg believed to be written by one of Paars' relatives; Paars' own diary (a trustworthy source, Mickelsen assures us, on a par with Xenophon's and Caesar's personal accounts); documents by Paars' servant Peder Ruus (which, however, were damaged in the shipwreck and are only preserved in fragments); the local barber Jens Block's *Chorographia insulæ Anholt*; a biography of the old woman Gunnild in the form of a funeral sermon (which, Mickelsen notes, may be somewhat panegyric; he has only dared to trust it when it could be confirmed by other sources); and most significantly, the history of contemporary Anholt by 'German Jochum' (*Tydske Jochum*), who in Hans Mickelsen's view may well be entitled the Thucydides of Anholt on account of his good judgement, honesty and impartiality. Finally, the sea journal of Anders the Mate (*Anders Styrmand*), which is simply written but trustworthy.

In short, the account of the insignificant voyage of merchant Peder Paars and of the small society of the island of Anholt is equipped with a pseudo-historiographical apparatus inflated to the dimensions of classical historiography and garnished with comments in contemporary scholarly style.



In the poem itself, the narrator is portrayed as committed to writing about real historical events, posing as an impartial, conscientious historiographer. He sees to it that the events are precisely located in time and space – Kalundborg, Anholt, Jutland in 1608; the battle of books at Copenhagen University is carefully dated by being related to local (fictive) events in Kalundborg.<sup>11</sup> Time and again Mickelsen professes his commitment to truth. He reflects on the obligations of the historian to draw a full portrait of the historical agents (II 2) and to explain the reasons behind a person's behaviour (II 2 235–238) etc. From time to time he refers to his sources, thereby seemingly documenting the truth of his narrative.<sup>12</sup>

### Just Justesen's learned commentaries – a parody on pedantry

In the notes by Just Justesen, the learned apparatus is highly elaborate. It is full of meticulous references to the sources in Hans Mickelsen's preface. However, not only are the sources entirely fictitious, they are also used to document the most surprising bits of information. Sometimes they concern trivial affairs as when the brief Latin note "Test. Tydske Joch. Hist. sui Temp." ('As witnessed by German Jochum in the History of his times') is used to 'document' the information that Paars and Ruus slept until midday (III 2, 270).

In other instances, the documentation is patently absurd. A reference to German Jochum's contemporary history of Anholt is cited as authority for the statement that the goddess of love, Venus, had never been prettier, and a little later the same author – the 'Thucydides of Anholt' – is referred to as authority for the goddess Envy's manoeuvres (III 3, 411).

This historical pseudo-documentation is only one aspect of Just Justesen's commentaries. A large part is concerned with pointing out the classical literary allusions in Hans Michelsen's poem, sometimes by way of explaining and interpreting, sometimes correcting Mickelsen's errors. Not surprisingly, many of these allusions refer to the epic models, the *Aeneid* and, to a lesser extent, the two Homeric epics. But also other classical poets are quoted in Justesen's notes, first and foremost Juvenal, Martial and Horace.

All these parallels serve, of course, to reinforce the comic effect of applying canonical classical literature to details of Danish daily life and of juxtaposing Virgil, Ovid and other classical texts with fictitious and very local sources. A classical text and a local fictive source may even be used to corroborate the same piece of information. To support Mickelsen's claim about the healing effect of music, Justesen refers *both* to the late ancient Jamblicus *and* to Tyske Jochum: 'See Jamblichus, in his book on Egyptian mysteries. Compare German Jochum's relections on this subject in the History of his Times, p. 430'.<sup>13</sup>

The portrait of Justesen is not without inconsistencies. He is not always ridiculous and he sometimes raises concerns that were Holberg's, functioning as Holberg's *alter ego*. He explains, for instance, that the satire in Hans



Mickelsen's poem is not aimed at particular persons but rather at human weakness in general, he points out that the poet pokes fun at those who oppose that women study, etc. In his preface he even articulates the criticism of the very pedantry that he elsewhere personifies (see also II 1, commentary to v. 267 and v. 301). But in general, Justesen's notes parody the learned commentary as a genre. Moreover, by their pseudo-documentation they underscore the parody, present in the poem itself, on uncompromising commitment to truth. It is tempting to see this as ridicule of contemporary readers' uneasy grasp of fiction.

With the construction of the author Hans Mickelsen and his commentator Just Justesen, and their insistence on the truth of their fictive sources, Holberg's *Peder Paars* exemplifies a trend in eighteenth-century fiction which has been termed pseudo-factuality. Pseudo-factual writings pretended 'to offer their readers real documents ripped straight from history – found manuscripts, entrusted correspondence, true stories and all the rest'. The reader was supposed to understand the game, and one may think of it as an implied, pseudo-factual contract or pact between writers and readers.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, however, in the case of *Peder Paars*, the 'pact' appears to have been unstable. The first edition of the first book (1719) caused the actual proprietor of the island Anholt, Frederik Rostgaard, in December 1719, to deliver a complaint to the Royal Council with the assistance of his client, the professor of Greek and Holberg's colleague Hans Gram.<sup>15</sup> Although the precise nature of their complaint is difficult to decipher, it seems clear that they found the description of the greedy and superstitious local people insulting to the real inhabitants of the island, and that they took offense at the suggestions that the local authorities were incompetent and corrupt. Moreover, they seem, at least to some degree, to have taken the claim of veracity in the text at face value, arguing that the text did not live up to historiographical standards. They pointed out that the text had not been submitted to censorship as it should have been, and they criticized the fact that it was published anonymously. On both points they stood on firm legal ground. Whether or not they were aware of the author's identity, is disputed. However, the complaint was rejected by the Council and the king, who simply answered that the poem in their eyes was sheer amusement.

In his subsequent writings, Holberg repeatedly assured his readers that his satire – in *Peder Paars* and elsewhere – was directed against human weaknesses and follies in general, not against specific persons. Nevertheless, the 'naïve' or rather 'suspicious' reading which appears to have been introduced by Rostgaard and Gram, proved to be long-lived. A so-called key that identified the characters of the poem with historical persons, was drawn up – perhaps as late as the 1740s – and circulated in manuscript.

Once Rostgaard's complaint over the first book of *Peder Paars* had been rejected, Holberg was in a position to react – and the serial publication form enabled him to take revenge in the third edition (1720). As we have seen, he has here considerably expanded Just Justesen's role as learned commentator



by adding the many pseudo-documentative commentaries and composing the meticulous list of fictive sources in Hans Mickelsen's introduction. It is reasonable to regard these new elements as Holberg's ironical response to the pedantic plaintiffs, his way of ridiculing their insistence on historical truth. But in other respects, Holberg clearly had to yield to Rostgaard's criticism: The element of social satire is much less prominent in the subsequent books (2–4) of *Peder Paars*.

It should not be overlooked that satire on pedantic learning elaborated in Just Justesens preface and notes was present already in the first edition of the first book. The description of Discordia's reign at the University of Copenhagen ridicules the quarrelsome professors who lose their temper over the problem of which part of Venus' body was hurt in the Trojan War. But the theme was strongly emphasized in the third edition, no doubt as a result of Rostgaard's and Gram's complaint. And after *Peder Paars*, satire on pedantic learning became a recurrent theme in Holberg's writings. He never tired of exposing the narrow-minded and self-aggrandizing pedant who was interested in minute and unimportant details with no sense of usefulness.

Holberg was not alone in this criticism. On the contrary, the learned pedant was a favorite target of the time.<sup>16</sup> Suffice it here to mention Johann Burchardt Mencke's *Charlataneria eruditorum* (1715), a satirical and much read treatise about vanity, pedantry, quarrelsomeness, deceit, hypocrisy and other kinds of misconduct in learned circles. This was a work that Holberg knew well and clearly enjoyed. Here he found the question of Venus' wound in the Trojan War, just as he borrowed a list of useless academic subjects in Just Justesen's preface from Mencke's text.

In sum, *Peder Paars* is basically a satire on pompousness. The irreverent parody on the *Aeneid*, the classic epic masterpiece and a symbol of noble pathos, goes hand in hand with the satirical exposure of learned conceit.

However, bearing in mind this fundamentally parodic nature of *Peder Paars*, we should not overlook that the poem also articulates a number of other issues that were to engage Holberg throughout his life. A prominent theme is the insistence that women ought to be able to study and hold office on a par with men. This is the subject of a long digression occasioned, as already mentioned, by the maid Marthe. Another theme for a digression is the unfortunate habit of uneducated people to regard themselves as competent judges in political matters. This was also a subject to which Holberg would often revert in his later writings, most famously in the comedy *The Political Tinker* (1723). Social and political tinkers and overzealous promoters of projects and causes in general were in his sights again in Book 4, and warnings against hasty, amateurish reforms became another recurrent topic in Holberg's writings, one shared by many contemporaries.

The intriguing question of the readership of *Peder Paars* has recently been discussed in an insightful study<sup>17</sup> that describes the implied reader of the poem as a multi-faceted creature: He is well versed in classical



literature in both Latin and Greek and acquainted with French and German seventeenth-century literature, a broad range of historiography and antiquarian scholarship. At the same time, however, he is able to appreciate not only the parody of traditional, antiquarian learning but also jokes of a cruder and crazier nature. It may be true, as suggested, that few actual readers conformed to this description, but that may have been exactly what motivated Holberg to write. Not one to hide his light under a bushel, he always wanted to shape the readers appropriate for his works. And in fact the poem appears to have enjoyed widespread popularity and to have been read not only among the educated elite, but also by a wider public. In fact, regarding the first book, Rostgaard expressed his concern over its success among uneducated readers. Bjerring-Hansen points out that the Third Edition (1720) is more clearly aimed at a learned public, both in terms of bibliographical codes and marketing measures, than the previous editions of the single books (1719–20). In sum, *Peder Paars*, also due to its complicated publication history, is a fascinating witness to a phase of early modern book culture when bibliographic, literary and marketing conventions were not yet stable.

### *Niels Klim*

Twenty years later, Holberg once again wrote a fictional travel account, the *Nicolai Klimii Iter subterraneum* (*Niels Klim's Travels Underground*). It was first published in 1741 and a second edition appeared in 1745. Unlike *Peder Paars*, it was written in Latin but it became such an instant success that it was translated into several modern European languages.

Against the background of *Peder Paars*, and its pervasive parody on the *Aeneid* and classical learning, it may at first glance seem surprising that Holberg's novel is seriously imbued with classical literature. The choice of Latin as the language of the novel is in itself noteworthy in view of the fact that Latin, the traditional common European language of learning, was now, in the eighteenth century, giving way to the vernaculars in most spheres, including literature. In all probability, Holberg wrote the novel in Latin in order to gain a European audience. And, once this choice was made, the novel became a very Latinate work, full of intertextual dialogue with the Roman classics. The choice of language had profound implications for the whole fabric of the novel, its rhetoric, style and the literary devices employed to convey its messages.<sup>18</sup>

### Résumé

This is the story of a young theologian, just graduated from the University of Copenhagen, Niels Klim, who returns to his native town Bergen in Western Norway and sets out to explore a mysterious cave in one of the local mountains. He falls down a long way, finally landing on another planet deep



inside the Earth. Here he becomes acquainted with a number of different societies inhabited by strange and surprising creatures – first and foremost the slow and sensible trees in the land of Potu.

His stay with them occupies roughly the first half of the novel, nine out of sixteen chapters. Sceptical of Niels' active mind, which in their eyes is a certain sign of superficiality, the Potuans do not consider him worthy to occupy an office of any significance. They recognize, though, that his two legs do have an advantage, and he is entrusted with the task of delivering messages between the towns and regions of Potu. After some time, Niels, tired of what he regards as a humiliating job, wants to improve his status by making a proposal for a significant societal change. He has not, however, understood the risk involved in this plan since the Potuans regard all changes with suspicion. He puts forward a proposal to the effect that women, who in Potu have the same access to all offices as men, should be deprived of this and kept at home. But the Potuans firmly reject this proposal.

As a punishment for having put forward this proposal, Niels is sent into exile in the land of Martinia. This opens the second half of the novel. The inhabitants of Martinia differ in every respect from the trees in Potu. They are swift and superficial monkeys who welcome all sorts of novelty and change without further consideration. Niels is here regarded as slow-witted, even imbecile. Realizing that the way to success here is to put forward the most useless and stupid proposal, he introduces the use of the wig. This is enthusiastically received among the vain monkeys and Niels is now admired and even ennobled. His success comes to an abrupt end when he rejects the advances of a noble woman, who takes revenge by claiming that he had tried to seduce her. Thus, in the superficial and rash Martinian society, Niels is the victim of a miscarriage of justice in telling contrast to his experiences with the legal system in Potu, where he had received a mild sentence for a crime of which he was guilty.

Again Niels is exiled. After having visited many strange societies, he finally suffers shipwreck and is cast ashore in the land of Quama, home of the crude and uncivilized Quamites. They are the only humans Niels encounters and by far the most primitive beings. The last part of the novel tells of Niels' rapid rise to power here. He introduces the Quamites to various weapons, first and foremost the use of gunpowder, which enables their army, with Niels as its general, to conquer the surrounding societies, among them the noble Mezendorians. His greed for power grows and he manages to become Quamitean emperor. But the glory is short lived. His tyrannical rule secures his downfall and finally he returns to Earth and spends the rest of his life as sacristan in his native town of Bergen.

The text is told in the first person as Niels' recollections, and although he seldom understands the implications of his own story, the reader is not left in doubt.

Like *Peder Paars*, this is a narrative about a young man who undertakes a journey that turns out to be much longer than expected. But whereas



Paars' journey takes place in a well-known local Danish setting, *Niels Klim* explores a strange fictional universe. The comic clash in *Paars Paars* between high epic form and Danish parochialism has no equivalent in *Niels Klim*. Nor is *Niels Klim* accompanied by learned notes as those by Just Justesen in *Peder Paars*. The play with the learned commentary as a pedantic genre is absent from the novel. But the underlying criticism of a hidebound antiquarian outlook and many social conventions is nonetheless, as we shall see, an important issue.

### The editorial fiction

Another feature shared by *Niels Klim* and *Peder Paars* is the intricate play with pseudonyms, fictional editors and their accompanying introductions and epilogues. Like *Peder Paars*, *Niels Klim* is an instance of the pseudo-factual approach to fiction that characterizes much literature in the eighteenth century.

Holberg published the novel under the name of Niels Klim. It purports to be Klim's own narrative, as told in a manuscript which his friend Abelin published posthumously. In the second edition of *Niels Klim* (1745) the pseudo-factual element has become even stronger, as it did in the prefaces in the final edition of *Peder Paars*. In both cases Holberg reacted to criticism raised against previously published versions. In *Niels Klim*'s second edition he added a preface in which he let fictive persons, Niels Klim's grandsons, react to criticism that had followed the publication of the first edition in 1741. However, Klim's grandsons do not address the criticism that had in fact been raised and which concerned religion. On the contrary, their concern is to prove the literal truth of their grandfather's account. Their argument runs along two equally absurd lines. First they list the names of a number of respected citizens of Bergen who have testified with their signature that after his death they found Niels Klim's own handwritten account accompanied by a grammar of the Quamitic language. Secondly they relate how a magician from the Finnmark has been sent to the Underworld and on his return was able to confirm everything that Niels Klim had told. In its patent absurdity this preface forms a parallel to Hans Mickelsen's assurance, in *Peder Paars*, of the truth of his account with references to all the – fictive – sources on which it is based.

### Social and moral themes in *Niels Klim*

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's travels* (1726) was an important inspiration for Holberg's *Niels Klim*. Both are examples of the pseudo-factual genre with their fictional travel accounts put into the mouth of the traveller himself, who has gone to far away regions and lived among strange creatures in alien societies. They are both parodies on the many travel narratives on the European book market. Through the protagonist's experiences both



novels raise a number of social issues, and they both reflect contemporary European exploration of and fascination with the unknown parts of the world. Finally, both purported to be autobiographies brought to the press by a friend, in *Gulliver's* case, by his cousin.

In the Introduction to *Moral Reflections* (1744), Holberg himself compares *Niels Klim* to *Gulliver's Travels*, declaring that both novels are a mixture of entertainment and instruction, but whereas entertainment dominates in *Gulliver*, the element of instruction is stronger in *Niels Klim*.<sup>19</sup> His debt to Swift is clear in, for example, Niels Klim's adventures in the Scientific Country, which bears close resemblance to Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels*. Both episodes ridicule absent-minded men of learning whose absorbing occupation with more or less useless matters make them neglect both their wives and the surrounding society.<sup>20</sup>

In the utopian and fictional context of *Niels Klim*, Holberg has managed to adopt a wide variety of philosophical, moral, social and religious themes. Many of these themes are discussed elsewhere in his writings – and some of them are already present in *Peder Paars*.

The theme of female education which we met in *Peder Paars* plays a significant role in *Niels Klim* and forms an integral element in the plot of the narrative. In the ideal society of sensible trees in Potu, women occupy offices on a par with men. The supreme judge is a woman. Niels Klim finds it strange at first but gradually realizes the wisdom of this arrangement: several women back home in Bergen, he reflects, would do a much better job as judge or lawyer than their incompetent brothers and fathers. But later it turns out that he has not really understood the core of the matter. Tired of his humiliating work as a messenger in the Potuan society, he decides to climb the social ladder by submitting a proposal for reformation of society. But as we have seen, his proposal that females should no longer be allowed to work outside their homes led to his exile among the monkeys of Martinia. Again this is an idea that occurs in *Peder Paars* and has been developed and integrated into the narrative in *Niels Klim*.

The theme of competence, of using one's particular talents to the benefit of society, is the subject of a digression in *Peder Paars* but has been developed into a core theme in *Niels Klim*. The insistence on females' access to offices is one instance of this general principle in Potu. The Potuan society is based on the concept of 'Know thyself'. Everybody must realize his or her own capacities and limits and strive to occupy a position in society that befits those talents, thus serving the common weal in the best possible way. In practice, individuals are guided by a council that determines in which job they will be of most use, and on this principle Niels is given the job as a messenger because of his swift legs.

The ethic of 'knowing thyself' is a central motif in Holberg's understanding of humanity, struck up already in *The Law of Nature* (1716) and present throughout his writings. In *Niels Klim* it is articulated first by the Potuan philosopher Rakbasi and later by the wise prince of Potu when he explains



to Niels Klim why he should be content with his present occupation. In both cases it is done by means of a quotation from a classical author, first Cicero, then Juvenal.

### Classical echoes

This brings us back to the role of classical literature in the novel. *Niels Klim* abounds with more or less hidden quotations from Petronius' *Satyricon*, often adding ironical comments to the narrative. This suggests that the *Satyricon* should be seen as the overall genre-model for *Niels Klim*, not only for the prosimetric form but also for the general idea of a full-scale book of satirical narrative fiction describing a journey, told in the first person by the main character. This Roman novel, written presumably in the time of Nero, had only been known in scattered fragments until 1664, when they were supplemented by the famous section describing the Dinner of Trimalchio, and this was the version that Holberg knew. The novel did not carry with it the solemn connotations of the epic and *Niels Klim* does not contain any of the genre parody that pervades *Peder Paars*.

The *Satyricon* is far from the only classical text that is echoed in Holberg's novel. It is full of quotations from Plautus, Pliny, Cicero and others, smoothly incorporated into Holberg's prose. Quotations from Roman poets – Juvenal, Horace, Ovid, Virgil – are graphically marked as verses and thereby made more prominent. In terms of moral philosophical teaching, classical literature is strongly present. Moral insights from Cicero, Horace and Juvenal are, as we have seen, put into the mouths of Potuan philosophers and statesmen. They become utopian voices, expressing timeless wisdom and eternal moral insights, valid in the no-where world of Potu, as well as in Holberg's Europe. The use of Cicero and Juvenal to express the guiding moral precept in Potu, know thyself, is one example.

Virgil's *Aeneid* holds a particular position. *Niels Klim* contains numerous allusions to and quotations from the *Aeneid* – but whereas they are rare in the first part of the narrative, they abound in the latter part, which tells of Niels Klim's arrival in Quama and his rise to power to become first general and later emperor.<sup>21</sup> In these capacities he organizes brutal conquests of the neighbouring societies. At the height of his power he regards himself as a greater ruler than Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar and assumes the megalomaniac title of emperor of the Fifth Monarchy, an indication that in his own eyes he is to be regarded as no less than the culmination of world history. By naming himself emperor of the Fifth Monarchy he placed himself in the tradition of the Four World Monarchies, a Christian model of world history dating back to late antiquity and based on Daniel's dream in the Old Testament, but enjoying considerable popularity in the early modern protestant world in the version of Philipp Melanchthon, known as Carion's Chronicle (first published 1532 in German, later expanded in Latin and published 1558ff). According to this model the world has been



ruled by four succeeding monarchies, the Assyrian, the Persian, the Greek and the Roman – the Roman being continued in the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation. With its narrow European horizon, however, the model became increasingly inadequate in the early modern period, as contact with, and knowledge about, other parts of the world grew. In Holberg's day it was about to have outlived itself as a piece of philosophy of history, but it lived on as a pedagogical tool that he used himself in a university textbook.<sup>22</sup>

The many echoes of Virgil's *Aeneid* in this part of the story add emphasis to this imperial theme in *Niels Klim*. Telling about the mythical foundation of Rome and celebrating Augustus' newly established supreme rule, the *Aeneid* symbolized Roman imperial power. Moreover, a number of other Roman texts dealing with early Rome and the establishment of the future empire are present, through quotations and allusions, in the account of Niels Klim's imperial expansion.<sup>23</sup> By making the Roman Empire an undercurrent beneath Niels Klim's conquests, Holberg may be said to follow a long tradition of celebrating power by alluding to Roman glory. However, in Holberg's version it is no heroic tale but a story of megalomania leading to defeat and catastrophe. When Niels Klim regards himself as ruler of the Fifth Monarchy and thus a successor of Alexander and Caesar only even more powerful, he is not only exposed as brutal, power greedy and megalomaniac, he also reveals his adherence to a view of the world that had, by the mid-eighteenth century, outlived itself.

Niels Klim is portrayed as a product of the dusty and narrow antiquarian classical studies that Holberg – and many others in his day – so often ridiculed. By contrast, the educational principles of the Potuans are characterized by good sense and usefulness. Their interests lie in economy, history, law and other subjects relevant to society. They find it absurd and amusing when they learn that Niels Klim has written his university dissertation about the use of slippers by two ancient peoples (the Greeks and Romans). It comes as a surprise to him, when later he attempts to civilize the primitive Quamites, that he cannot depend on his skill in the classical languages: 'What I myself had learned in Europe,' he says, 'that is, the Latin language and some phrases in Greek, was of no use here.'<sup>24</sup> Niels is, in other words, a narrow-minded antiquarian pedant like the learned commentator Just Justesen in *Peder Paars* (at least as he is portrayed in the greater part of his commentaries) – and like Erasmus Montanus in the eponymous comedy (1731). Their horizon is defined by old books. In Erasmus and Niels Klim, however, this narrow-mindedness is accompanied with arrogance, an arrogance which in the case of Niels Klim turns into uncontrollable thirst for power.

In the first half of the narrative Niels Klim is a comic figure. Again and again his antiquarian and European horizon is confronted with the Potuans' common sense – and sometimes he, momentarily, recognizes the wisdom of Potuan points of view. He tells about a farmer in Potu who was given the surname 'the Great' owing to his ability to produce many children and to



raise them to be moral and responsible beings. This is the Potuans' concept of a hero, Niels Klim explains:

How different from us [Europeans], who give the surname 'the Great' to those who destroy the human race. It is not difficult to guess what the Potuans would have thought of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar who both died without children and both had sent thousands of people to their death.<sup>25</sup>

But in the latter half of the novel, Klim's limited classical outlook acquires a dangerous dimension. Now he sees himself as the successor to Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar and articulates his greed for power in antiquarian terms, in the tradition of the Four Monarchies. In his own eyes now, he is even more than Alexander entitled to the suffix 'the Great', and he thus places himself in the classical European tradition of cruel and destructive generals and rulers of world monarchies.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, his exploration of unknown parts of the world inside the Earth is an allegory of early modern European exploration of hitherto unknown continents. Niels Klim stresses his identity as European, not as Dano-Norwegian. Throughout, he reflects on the differences between the subterranean societies and Europe. And conversely when we hear of a subterranean traveller's visit to the world above, it is only Europe that he describes.

A concrete allusion to European conquests of distant territories is found in Niels Klim's introduction of gunpowder to the primitive Quamites. This is, in fact, the only European invention he brings to the peoples in the underworld (except for the wig that gives him short-lived prestige in the Martinian society). In the intense battle with the brave Mezendorians, the Quamites' use of heavy artillery finally makes the Mezendorian leader declare that they are fighting an impossible battle against an enemy who is related to the gods. This is an echo of Holberg's *Lives of Heroes* written a few years earlier (1739). There he explains that the only reason that the Spaniards were able to defeat the Indians under the leadership of Atahualpa and Montezuma in the early sixteenth century was their artillery; faced with guns and cannons, the Indians regarded every Spaniard as a god, 'a Jupiter who could move Heaven and Earth at his will, a ruler of thunder and lightning – a wonderful gift which in their view only the gods possessed'.<sup>27</sup>

Niels Klim's antiquarian outlook, then, which makes him interpret his conquests in the tradition of Alexander and Caesar, is also a Eurocentric narrow-mindedness. This is a criticism of unreflecting, antiquarian pedantry with much gloomier perspectives than the cheerful ridicule of stupid pedantry and stubborn adherence to literary authorities found in *Peder Paars*. Whereas the journey of Peder Paars is a parody, also in terms of literary form, of Aeneas' adventures, the journey of Niels Klim in its latter phase acquires an element of allegory of European explorations and warfare around the



Earth. The *Aeneid* here comes to symbolize not only hackneyed adherence to worn-out conventions but also the Roman Empire as an abstract symbol of power, being a central component in the model of the Four Monarchies. The narrow-minded antiquarian focus already parodied in *Peder Paars* is combined with European arrogance.

Both these texts bear evidence to Holberg's intimate familiarity with classical literature and to his creative ability to make intertextual use of literary models. Holberg does not question the study of classical literature in itself – on the contrary, throughout his writings he was in constant dialogue with the classical writers. But he has a keen eye for the pompous and narrow-minded antiquarianism that in his view dominated contemporary university education. He regarded it as not only ridiculous but also potentially harmful. The ridiculous aspect of antiquarian learning is a main target of the satire in *Peder Paars*. In *Niels Klim*, antiquarianism is seen in a gloomier perspective and combined with a criticism of tyrannical power and European exploration.

## Notes

- 1 Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment. A Genealogy* (Chicago: 2010), 37–43.
- 2 See e.g. 'Democritus og Heraclitus', 311f, in *Fire Skæmtedigte* [Four Satirical Poems], A5v; *Epigrammatum libri septem*, 3,41 ('Whether humans gradually deteriorate'); and his *Moral Reflections*, III, 41. This is a main point in Ole Thomsen, *Pessimist og munter. En bog om Holberg*, to which I am indebted. Cf. Ole Thomsen, 'Lys af klassik og komik', in *Oplysningens Verden. Holbergs eksempel*, ed. Thomas Ledet and Ole Høiris (Aarhus: 2007), 527–534.
- 3 *Ad virum perillustrem epistola* [First Autobiographical Letter] (1728), 125–126.
- 4 See the introduction to *Peder Paars* by Jens Kr. Andersen in *holbergsskrifter.dk* (= *holbergsskrifter.no*) (2015)
- 5 On the English mock-heroic epic and its background, see Ulrich Broich, *The Eighteenth Century Mock-Heroic Poem*, trans. D. H. Wilson (Cambridge: 1990).
- 6 *Lives of Heroines*, Preface.
- 7 This genre marker only appears in the third edition of *Peder Paars*. On the title page of Book One in the first edition 1719 Holberg had played on quite different genre expectations by presenting the poem as *En Ny og Sandfærdig Wiise* (A New and Truthful Ballad), hinting at the popular broadsheet ballads (*skillingsviser*). See Jens Bjerring-Hansen, *Holberg på bogmarkedet. Studier i Peder Paars og den litterære kultur i 1700- og 1800-tallet* (Copenhagen: 2015), 85–117.
- 8 *Peder Paars*, Preface.
- 9 F. J. Billeskov Jansen argued that Holberg began by writing this episode on the basis of Boileau before having conceived the idea of *Peder Paars*; only later did he develop the idea of Paars' voyage, reducing the battle of books to a digression; F.J. Billeskov Jansen, 'Studier i Peder Paars' Tilblivelseshistorie', *Orbis litterarum. Revue danoise d'histoire littéraire* III (1945): 231–232.
- 10 See Niels Møller: 'Komiske helte digte', in his *Nattevagter. Udvalgte Afhandlinger* (Copenhagen: 1923), 255–275.
- 11 Concerning the fictive poet, Hans Mickelsen, and the just as fictive commentator, Just Justesen, see Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, 'Ludvig Holbergs spejlkabinet. De fiktive udgiverapparater: satire, parodi og mystifikation', *Danske Studier* (2014): 111–143.



- 12 See e.g. II 3, 317, and III 1.
- 13 Justesen's commentary to IV, 2, 277). Holberg has probably taken the Jamblicus-reference from Daniel Morhof's *Polyhistor* (1688–1707), as suggested by Georg Christensen in Holberg, *Peder Paars og Skæmtedigtene*, ed. Georg Christensen (Copenhagen: 1925), 403.
- 14 Nicholas Paige: *Before Fiction: The Ancien Regime of the Novel* (Philadelphia, PA: 2011), x. Cf. Lasse Gammelgaard, 'Fortællende digte og sirlig løgn: Pseudofakticitet og urimeligt rimet aleksandrinertale i Ludvig Holbergs 'Peder Paars'', *Nordica* 30 (2013): 203–231.
- 15 Cf. chapter 1, 34–35; Bjerring-Hansen: *Holberg på bogmarkedet*, 190–207; and Thomsen, *Pessimist og munter*.
- 16 Cf. Alexander Kosenina, *Der gelehrte Narr. Gelehrten satire seit der Aufklärung* (Göttingen: 2003).
- 17 The following remarks are based on Bjerring-Hansen, *Holberg på bogmarkedet*, 190–207.
- 18 In the new, digital edition of *Niels Klim*, the commentary registers and discusses its allusions to classical literature, [holbergsskrifter.dk/holbergsskrifter.no](http://holbergsskrifter.dk/holbergsskrifter.no), 2015.
- 19 Holberg, *Moralske Tanker*, 10.
- 20 Karen Skovgaard-Petersen and Peter Zeeberg, 'Verdensfjerne matematikere, blodtørstige anatomer og sexhungrende hustruer: Swifts Gulliver og Holbergs Klim', *Aigis* (2014), suppl. III: <http://aigis.igl.ku.dk/CMT80/KSP-PZ.pdf> (accessed 14.6.2016).
- 21 The unequal distribution of quotations from the *Aeneid* was first demonstrated in Sigrid Peters, *Ludvig Holbergs menippeiske Satire: Das 'Iter subterraneum' und seine Beziehungen zur antiken Literatur* (Frankfurt a.M.: 1986).
- 22 *Synopsis historiæ universalis* (1733); the model made it possible, as he explains, to outline the history of the world in a clearly structured way.
- 23 These quotations and allusions are discussed in the commentary to the edition of *Niels Klim* in [holbergsskrifter.dk/holbergsskrifter.no](http://holbergsskrifter.dk/holbergsskrifter.no).
- 24 *Niels Klim*, 29.
- 25 *Niels Klim*, 92.
- 26 The true nature of heroism was a recurrent theme in Holberg's writings. See chapter 5.
- 27 *Adskillige Store Henltes og Berømmelige Mænds . . . Historier*, I, 575.



## 7 Holberg's comedies: intentions and inspirations

*Bent Holm*

Holberg stands in the common mind primarily as an author of comedies. His plays have obtained a remarkable dissemination; a handful of them maintain a lasting popularity in the Scandinavian countries, meaning that although they are not necessarily being read any more, they still remain in the theatres' repertoires.<sup>1</sup> Phrases and words from the plays have become proverbial in Danish and Norwegian, used often without awareness of their provenance. Although quantitatively a minor part of the collected works, the comedies were not the works Holberg was least proud of. Moreover, theatre notions and metaphors imbue even his philosophical and historical writings. Roleplaying, masking, staging are significant concepts in his view of human behaviour. His gaze on the world is very much that of the man of the theatre. There are no firewalls between the playwright, the philosopher and the historian, and this chapter therefore treats the comedies as part of an overall intellectual and ideological strategy. First the stage will be set – the historical backdrop of the founding of a new Danish theatre, with a specific focus on Holberg's defensive position, his apology for the theatre. Then the offensive part of his project will be presented – the comedies as a cultural utterance. And the concluding part suggests a reflection on theatre and theatricality in a larger perspective. In short, the programme, the implementation and the philosophy.

### Arguments for a new theatre

Professional theatre in the vernacular was a new phenomenon in Denmark-Norway in the first part of the eighteenth century. The ambition and strategy was to provide the kingdom with a cultural institution and a literary genre known from greater nations. Although the initiative probably came from high-ranking persons in the administrative and intellectual hierarchy and the new stage was awarded a royal license, it was regarded with some suspicion by other parts of the academic and ecclesiastical establishment. The theatre was inaugurated in Copenhagen in September 1722 with Molière's *The Miser* in a Danish translation and adaptation, followed a couple of days later by the comedy *The Political Tinker*, a Danish original text written



by Holberg. In the long run, this event acquired great artistic and cultural importance, but the contemporary press seems to have considered it of little significance. However, the University was immediately worried, and although it did not have any formal authority in the matter, the new stage was obliged to take its opinion into account. In both artistic and strategic connections, Holberg played a main role, as a playwright and a theorist. Or rather, he played various roles, using different pseudonyms and different styles. The polemicist's arguments would even appear in the dramatist's dialogues.

In Europe in general the eighteenth century was an era of theatre reforms. Theatre had earlier been practiced predominantly by court troupes or travelling comedians, and in Denmark these were respectively French and German. It might even be combined with quack practices, which did not add to its social reputation.<sup>2</sup> During the first decades of the century various intellectuals began to update the stage by giving it a contemporary approach, a literary quality, a socio-cultural function and a respectable position in society. The dramaturgical model of this reformed stage was predominantly found in Molière's comedies, in opposition to the spectacular baroque tendencies of the strolling troupes in Northern Europe and to the stereotyped farce of the Italian masked comedy. Reformers and playwrights such as Louis Riccoboni, Carlo Goldoni, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Denis Diderot endeavoured to introduce a contemporary and recognizable reality on the stage, including discussions of moral and social issues, all of which should be seen in the light of the era's modernization and Enlightenment processes. Placed in such a context, Holberg appears to be a remarkably early example of a reformer. Riccoboni introduced his ideas in practice in 1716 in Paris, as a kind of predecessor to Goldoni, who was more successful in the 1740s with a reform towards a bourgeois comedy. Lessing and Diderot made their mark of innovation in the following decade.

In his comic-satirical works Holberg appeared as 'Hans Mickelsen', brewer and citizen of the city of Kalundborg. The good brewer's works had comments by the learned 'Just Justesen' who for the first volume of 'Mickelsen's' comedies from 1723 wrote a theoretical preface, a dissertation about comedies, which in practice is an apology for theatre as an art form and at the same time the first elaborate Danish theatre theory. 'Justesen' rejects the contention that theatre is a waste of time or even harmful; on the contrary, he says, it is both useful and morally improving. Implicitly, his defence is a response to the attacks on the new Danish stage by the academic and ecclesiastical authorities. The University's prompt reaction in the matter was due to the fact that the male actors were students, that is students of theology, and they were not doing didactic school comedy for edification but appeared on stage on professional terms for money. Such a combination of sacred and profane was intolerable and gave rise to serious reproaches. Rector Magnificus, Hans Bartholin, resolved that the students should be denied access to exams, colleges and subsidies. The cases were discussed in



the *consistorium*, the governing committee of professors, including Holberg, which ended up issuing a declaration of disapproval of the presumptuous behaviour of the individuals in question and a severe instruction about the reformation of life needed if they were to have any hope of being restored to favour. This was the milder of the sanctions discussed in the committee.

Holberg's double position required a delicate balance. He was both a professor and author of the comedies that the students played in. These cases and a similar one from 1749 – when the theatre had been revived after almost twenty years' closure for religious reasons – demonstrate the anti-theatre reasoning. Theatre was by its nature problematic since it operated in a false reality; and when it exposed irreverent and shameless passions, it might be immoral and seductive. Furthermore, it was an aggravating circumstance if a former actor should become a clergyman, or even a teacher; his credibility would have been fatally damaged. When the words of God were taken in a mouth that earlier had conveyed the rotten speech of comedy, one could not be sure whether this was not just another role being played. These accusations belong to a long tradition of anti-theatre arguments.<sup>3</sup> Even an argument about the theatre's allegedly feminizing effect seems to have been put forward, judging from Bellona's line in Holberg's *New Year's Prologue* performed in 1723. According to Bellona theatre is harmful, as it serves only to 'plunge brave folks into effeminacy'. Apollo responds:

Wonder whether Plautus has made Rome effeminate and timid  
Molière by his pen weakened the power of France?

'Justesen' then opens the discussion by referring to different positions among the church fathers and various Christian kings and princes for or against theatre as an art form, among them 'a Prince de Conti who writes a whole book against comedies, saying: The purpose of comedies is to arouse the passions, that of the Christian religion to calm them'.<sup>4</sup> The reference is to prince Armand de Bourbon-Conti's anti-theatre treatise from 1666, the *Traité de la comédie et des spectacles, selon la tradition de l'Église tirée des conciles et des saints Peres*. 'Justesen' goes on to mention 'a great theologian' who 'sets aside other business and uses his pen to defend plays', which is a reference to the *Lettre d'un théologien illustre par sa qualité et par son mérite* concerning the question 'whether comedy may be permitted or ought to be absolutely forbidden' from 1694 by the Italian Theatine father Francois Caffaro, who was active in Paris. Caffaro wrote his apologetic treatise as a preface of the plays by Edme Boursault, as 'Justesen' writes the preface to 'Mickelsen'. He goes against the church fathers, arguing that at their time theatre was coarse and immoral, whereas the new contemporary theatre is modest and decent. To his mind, comedy belongs to the category of things indifferent; it is by definition neither good nor bad. However, Caffaro reckoned without his host. The French theological climate became increasingly severe during the latter part of the seventeenth century, along



with a deepening of the king's religious scruples. Caffaro was strongly condemned by the Sorbonne. However, the heaviest blow came from the era's leading theologian, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, in his *Maximes et Réflexions sur la Comédie* from 1694. His book summarizes the main arguments from the theatrophobic tradition rooted in the church's neo-Platonic heritage, including Plato's advice to expel the tragedians from the *polis* and in tune with the Jesuits' referral of the stage to the *civitas diaboli*, the antithesis to the *civitas dei*.<sup>5</sup> However, his points of view do not belong exclusively to the Counter-Reformation, or indeed to Roman Catholics as such. They were shared by Lutheran orthodox and pietist theologians, and they recur in the Danish denouncements.

Nevertheless, 'Just Justesen's' main references are to the church fathers and to the French late seventeenth-century polemics. In his text the apologetical distinction between 'virtuous and indecent comedies' plays the same role as in Caffaro and is furthermore supplemented with a reference to Hugo Grotius as testimony to how useful the reading of comedies is for 'learning and virtue', although 'Justesen' adds that some 'useless madness' does serve the overall purpose by making the moral lesson palatable. 'Justesen' parallels Caffaro's questions about the admissibility of comedies, when he discusses whether it is contrary to certain persons' social standing to write comedies, and whether it is acceptable for decent people's sons and daughters to play in them. Evidently, the first point has more to do with Holberg's own position as a university professor and less with the reputation of the brave brewer 'Mickelsen'. 'Justesen' answers the question negatively with reference to 'comedies and entertaining novels written by princes, counts, barons, knights, yes, even priests, monks and Jesuits nowadays' and, in antiquity, by the 'ablest and greatest men'. He repeats the argument, well known from a number of apologists including Caffaro, that 'modern comedies surpass the ancient in ingenuity as well as learning and decency'. Consequently, it 'can only be on account of envy or unnatural taste that honourable people are criticised nowadays for writing clever and edifying comedies'. Here the key word is 'unnatural'; a taste that does not correspond with the Holbergian preferences is repeatedly defined in his writings as not 'natural'. By that he means not in accordance with 'nature' as a constant, as something given a priori. This stands in a dialectical counterposition to Holberg's other fundamental position, his recurrent reference to the inconstancy of tastes, trends and fashions.

The latter is exactly the argument 'Justesen' uses to oppose the second objection, concerning the possible indecency of young persons performing on the stage, if, for instance, they were later to serve in churches and schools. 'Decorum or Bienséance' depends on the country's fashions, and 'if all the ministers in the city were to decide attending the theatre, they would be no more indecent than the clergy in England or France'. Apparently, decency is a matter of convention, not of nature. The moment the high authority declares it is against decency, then it is so, and *vice versa*. Implicitly yet



unmistakably, Holberg through 'Justesen' hints at the hostile attitude of the capital's clergy. As in Caffaro, this reasoning seems to rank theatre in moral theology's neutral category of indifferent things, *adiaphora*, in contrast to the theological theatrophobia.

Against this background 'Justesen' defines a dramaturgical strategy for the new Danish stage. One important point concerns the necessity of adapting foreign texts in order to assure their credibility on stage. Probability and recognizability should be observed. That is why for instance Molière's *Tartuffe* apparently could not be performed in Copenhagen, 'for the main character is a Directeur de Conscience, who with pretended piety usurps power in a house, and that sort of people are only cultivated in Roman Catholic countries'.<sup>6</sup> Eventually 'Justesen' makes it clear that the comedies of 'Mickelsen' could compare with Molière's, for 'the pleasure people have found in those pieces arises purely from the comedies themselves, since the author has not played to the eye but to the ear alone. He has not corrupted the comedies by playing to the gallery with fanciful spectacles nor made them unduly ingenious just to please the boxes'. He adds, that 'the author . . . by this and other constant effort has brought it about that our Danish, which hitherto has had no recognition, now holds its head high against both French and English.'

It is remarkable that Holberg in the preface to the comedies took his arguments from the French Roman Catholic polemics. It appears to be a rather indirect way of coping with the domestic discussions, which in any case were inspired by German ideas. German pietism had a significant impact on Danish theology, and Philipp Jacob Spener's rejection of the art of theatre played an important role both in German and Danish contexts. Danish Orthodox Lutherans influenced their German brethren with their anti-theatre attitudes. The German theologian Johannes Lassenius became the 'Hauptprediger' at the German congregation in Copenhagen in the late seventeenth century and one of the city's strongest and most frequented preachers, thundering against theatre.<sup>7</sup> One specific German discussion that took place from the 1680s and up until the 1720s is particularly interesting in this connection. It arose from controversies about the opera in Hamburg, a city over which the Danish kings as dukes of Holstein traditionally claimed a contested and ineffective suzerainty. In Hamburg the dispute was dramatic, theatre was decried as '*opera diabolica*' in a number of pamphlets for and against.<sup>8</sup> Spener was involved, academic responsa were requested, among them from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz who actually supported the stage. It was a fight about souls – and in many ways it made up the backdrop of the anti-theatre reactions against the new Danish stage. Given that he could not comment on the domestic criticism, Holberg might have referred to the German discussions, close in time, space and impact as they were. He was familiar with the events in Hamburg, which moreover happens to be the scene of his first comedy, *The Political Tinker*. Yet, not with one single word does 'Justesen' touch on those circumstances in his



apology for 'Mickelsen's' comedies. The French approach was obviously chosen for tactical reasons, as a kind of *Verfremdung* technique typical for Holberg's veiling of controversial discussions. When on a rare occasion he dealt overtly with pietism – shortly after its decline as *de facto* state religion – he referred to the disturbances that have arisen in "our Church" and ends with a cautious distinction between sincere and fanatic pietists, thus managing to speak his mind while maintaining a dialectical position. He comparatively rarely criticized pietism directly, instead he used allusions.<sup>9</sup> When for example in 1733 he wrote a critical *Deliberation on Conventicles*, only published posthumously in 1755, about pietistic assemblies (conventicles), he pretended it was about dissenters almost a century earlier. In his late comedy *Philosopher in Own Imagination*, the main character is called a 'philosopher', but from various terms and hints it becomes clear that in reality he is a satire on a pietist, who obviously abhors joy, comedy and theatre. The main character of the comedy calls himself 'Cosmoligoreus', that is 'the scorner of the world', even though his civil name is simply Cosmus Holgersen.<sup>10</sup> Holberg only uses the French polemics as a strategic philosophical smokescreen to express his – or rather 'Justesen's' – opinion on the Danish discussion.

But Holberg – or rather 'Mickelsen' – also reacts as a playwright. His meta-theatrical comedy *Witchcraft or False Alarm* takes place in Thisted, a small town in Jutland notorious for an affair of scandalous 'witchcraft' and superstition. It now happens that a troupe of actors in Thisted are taken for magicians or witches, although in reality there was no theatre in Thisted. 'Thisted' means Copenhagen. At the end the embarrassing mistake is resolved. The entire fourth act consists of discussions between the actress Apelone and a number of characters who claim to be offended by the satirical comedies. Most of them are characters from Holberg's comedies who now gloat because the comedians finally get what they deserve, a death penalty. One particular character is von Quoten, the Danish company's German rival, who apart from being a theatre manager also practiced as a quack and thus in every way represented the kind of theatre from which it was so important to distance oneself. Prepare yourselves for your death, 'for you have offended the whole world'.<sup>11</sup> Implicitly, Holberg compared the capital's theatrephobes with superstitious backward provincial citizens. The discussion of the moral and social necessity and usefulness of the satirical stage appears in several of the comedies as a sub-theme. However, in *Witchcraft or False Alarm*, it is *the* focus.

The motive for the foundation of a new national stage was patriotic, a matter of national glory; it was linguistic, to develop the vernacular; and civil, to sharpen people's sense of what was culturally and individually reasonable and unreasonable. The theatre was granted a royal licence, provided it respected religious doctrines. However, when the king developed pietist leanings, especially from 1728, the theatre's days were numbered. This had to do with the disastrous fire in Copenhagen which was seen



as God's punishment and was commemorated as such in the churches by annual memorial services; later on Holberg questioned that assertion, given that churches, hospitals and schools burned down too, while brothels were spared. With a typical alienation strategy Holberg quotes the judgement of 'a good man who was present then and about whose learning and sense people agree'.<sup>12</sup> For nearly two decades, theatre was out of the question, although it was the object of a number of theological dissertations. In 1737 the era's leading theologian, Erik Pontoppidan, published the catechism *Truth unto Godliness*, based on Spener. In connection with the Third Commandment he accentuates that 'sinful desires for things such as dances, games, comedies . . . are always inherently sinful.' Theatre was thus not *adiaphora*.<sup>13</sup>

### Theatre in practice

In addition to explaining why the new stage was a significant and valuable agent in public life, Holberg also had to develop a new genre. Apart from didactic school comedies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, practically no plays had been written in Danish. He sought his models and inspirations mainly in three fields. First, he turned to the classical Roman comedy, especially Plautus whom he, despite his 'defects', repeatedly declared to prefer to the more formally polished, but less lively Terence. Secondly, he learned much from Molière, a modern Plautus who was the idol and master due to his exemplary realism and compositional skill, but at the same time the rival for the public's favour. Thirdly, there was the Italian masked comedy, for even though he was critical of empty farce and stage tricks, Holberg took a good deal of inspiration from the Théâtre Italien collection of grotesque, irreverent, carnivalesque harlequinades from the late seventeenth century. Consequently, when Pierre Marivaux, among others, successfully promoted a new moral and sentimental kind of harlequinades in Paris in the 1720s, Holberg saw it as a betrayal of the 'real' Italian comedy, that is the 'old' down-to-earth comedy. The fundamental *vis comica* – theatrical power – of the commedia dell'arte counted, regardless of the genre's imperfections.

The comedies of Holberg should be read as interwoven with ancient comedy, Molière and commedia dell'arte. In his late years, when he tended to return to classical models, Holberg adapted both Plautus and Aristophanes. He used Molièresque plots and techniques; two of his comedies are directly written as counterpieces to Molière; Sganarelle, Molière's comic servant, figures a couple of times. And Holberg wrote two harlequinades, one in the 'old' grotesque style, and one ironic Marivaudage.

It is not irrelevant in this context that the artistic leader of the theatre was the French actor and former head of the royal French court troupe in Copenhagen, Montaigu, *nom d'artiste* of René Magnon, son of a colleague of Molière, the playwright Jean Magnon. He was trained in the tradition of Molière which had a decisive influence on his work as royal stage director, in which capacity he furthermore went to Paris various times, last in 1721,



to seek inspiration and update his knowledge of contemporary Parisian theatre, including the Théâtre Italien. The Italian inspiration can be traced in his stagings.

The specific Holbergian dramaturgy combines a French and an Italian approach. The French part concerns formal accuracy in a well-ordered dramaturgical model, in line with reason and stringency and based on classical Aristotelian principles. It was a result of the academic prescription of aesthetic rules in the *Grand Siècle*'s general imposition of norms and structures in state and society. It was formulated by among others Jean Chapelain and Francois d'Aubignac, and in the present connection particularly by Nicolas Boileau in his *Art poétique* (1674) to whom Holberg refers as both satirist and theorist. The model was based on the three unities – of time, space and action – and presupposed causality and probability; all transitions between scenes should be logical, the stage should never be empty, etc. The predominant structure was the five-act model; the exposition leads via the complications of the fundamental conflict to the confrontation and desperation, eventually ending up in the *dénouement*, the tragic or happy solution to the conflict. According to Holberg, one should not be the slave of rules. Academic criteria did not suffice to ensure a comedy's effect on the stage. Nevertheless, these canonic rules made up his dramaturgical instrumentarium and vocabulary. He used them as critical weapons and arguments in his fight against especially the German stage with its allegedly irrational dramaturgy, similar to Elizabethan narrative techniques with its, in a classical perspective, chaotic structure. German theatre, which was also presented in Copenhagen, was a pompous and heroic baroque universe, spectacular, fantastic or historical dramas featuring gods, princes and heroes. Holberg's dramatic universe, conversely, focused mainly on contemporary everyday life and characters, not the world of gods and heroes; his theatre is prosaic, anti-pathetic, ironic. Mythological, symbolic and heroic implications were part of an old-fashioned conception of the world that did not refer to any concrete reality and therefore should be ridiculed. This ought to be seen in light of the contrast between *les anciens* and *les modernes*; as should his entire project and production. And Holberg was a modernist, up to a point.

However, this 'modern' French approach was combined with an Italian sense of grotesque absurdity, a particular predilection for 'madness'. When in 1726, he sought a break-through on the French stage, he did not address the Comédie Française, but Riccoboni's Théâtre Italien.

In a European context the success of his comedies came to depend on his relative degree of modernity. In France they appeared old-fashioned, out of step with the more refined and sentimental tendencies that began to rule the stage from the 1720s. Neither did the French edition of selected comedies from 1746 have any success. Holberg's comedies appeared immediately on the German theatre companies' billboards, due to the fact that they filled a need for a contemporary repertoire instead of the conventional pompous plays. The comedies were played, adapted and published.<sup>14</sup>





Figure 7.1 Frontispiece from the first volume of a Dutch edition of Holberg's comedies, *Zes aardige en vermakelyke Blyspeelen* (Amsterdam 1757, 6 vols.). The engraving shows Thalia, the muse of comedy, holding Holberg's portrait while distributing his plays from a cornucopia to the eagerly awaiting public below. In the background above are Mount Parnassus with Apollo and the rest of the muses, as well as Pegasus and a winged Fame with the book's title on a banner. Photo: Kristoffer Schmidt from the collection of Sorø Akademi.



Holberg's overall project, his 'know thyself' strategy, aims at three levels, dealing with respectively the upper, the middle and the lower strata of society. It is about preposterously pompous self-images; about individual irrationalities and peculiarities; and about ignorance and superstition. It concerns loss of a sense of reality, a discrepancy between reality and perception, between behaviour and competence, to be driven *ad absurdum* during the accelerating dramatic construction. The actual stage was a significant platform for these intellectual and didactic strategies. That too goes for the armchair stage, the diffusion of the plays in printed versions. During the lifetime of the first theatre, Holberg published three volumes of comedies in the 1720s. In the beginning of the 'prohibition' period, 1728–47, he released two additional volumes in 1731, as 'as proof of what it has been possible to accomplish in this form of writing'.<sup>15</sup> And finally, after the re-opening of the theatre, he published another two volumes of late comedies in the 1750s. In all thirty-four titles, mostly in five acts, but also some in three or even one, and a couple of them in various versions. He used and combined genres like comedy of character, comedy of intrigue, comedy of manners, tragicomedy, parody, allegory and even a 'heroic drama', a text by Metastasio in verse adapted to prose, thus rendering it more 'natural'. The texts are mostly situated in recognizable urban, occasionally rural, settings and only in a few cases in more romantic or Romanesque environments. That goes for the texts in a literary sense; the way they were staged did not aim at individualizing realism or characterization in scenery or in costumes – both were generic, standardized and conventional, and furthermore identical with the equipment used for the staging of the foreign texts. There were, in practice, no sharp boundaries between domestic and foreign plays; even the latter, according to 'Just Justesen', should reflect a recognizable domestic reality. The stock names of Holberg's characters recur in the translations/adaptations of foreign comedies, a concrete reflection of the ambition that the domestic plays should be in line with the imported ones. The repertory of fixed types, fathers, lovers, smart and stupid servants etc. is based on classical models. Holberg's selection of characters corresponds largely with Louis Riccoboni's *Nouveau Théâtre Italien* in Paris. The middle class dominates. When, rarely, classical gods appear, it happens in a humorous atmosphere, for instance in *Without Head and Tail*. This play has a meta-theatrical prologue with a discussion of form and meaning in the genre of comedy – and which substitutes an allegedly lost first act! After Jove has drawn the conclusions of the discussion, he declares, in a manner far from baroque loftiness:

I'll go and find a place in the gallery . . . to show others an example of humility and cure people of the pretentious obsession that it is demeaning to go to the theatre without a seat in the front boxes.<sup>16</sup>

Conversely, when in the late comedy *Plutus*, Jove scolds the greedy citizens of the *polis*, there is no parody in play.<sup>17</sup> The allegorical comedy is a



paraphrase of Aristophanes' homonymous work; typical of Holberg's dialectical strategy, he presents a counter-text to the model text. When Aristophanes' Plutus is cured for his blindness, it is a blessing to the citizens. In Holberg's version, it is a curse.

Although 'Justesen' does not highlight it particularly, *Jeppe of the Hill*<sup>18</sup> has become the author's most popular and most discussed play. It differs from the urban middle-class family plot, the leading character being a simple peasant. However, it contains so many features that – in the perspective of strategy and dramaturgy – it may serve as an example of how the 'rules' are dealt with; how the theatrical space is used; and what semantic implications that has.

Instead of going to town to buy soap the poor and alcoholic peasant Jeppe spends his money at Jacob Shoemaker's illicit inn, getting seriously drunk and increasingly courageous. He tumbles down and falls asleep on the dungheap, where he is found by the Baron and his attendants. The Baron decides to make Jeppe believe he is the lord. He is placed in the Baron's bed and convinced by a couple of doctors that this is no illusion. Jeppe introduces an upside-down regime where he is about to execute the Baron's men and have sex with the steward's wife, but in his drunkenness he tumbles down again and is thrown back on the dungheap, then put on trial, charged with a number of crimes and sentenced to death. After a mock execution he wakes up, the Judge gives him a few coins – and once again he turns to drinking. The truth is revealed, that a cruel joke has been played on him, he leaves the stage mortified, and the Baron draws the conclusion, that when power is given overnight to ordinary unqualified people, it ends in a regime of terror.

Jeppe is an unproductive drunkard and an imaginative lazybones. His proneness to escapist fantasies makes him defenceless against the intrigue played on him. His sexual and social humiliation as a cuckold and an underdog determines his need for revenge and compensation. However, the author's spokesman is the Baron. As a ruler, he is the representative of a pragmatic and reasonable order. Although Jeppe is portrayed with a certain amount of empathy, the didactic idea is to demonstrate his cruel potential when raised to a position of power.

The dramaturgical rules Holberg argued for were based on logic, coherence and causality, notions that thematically belong to the Baron's domain. According to the model, the first act should constitute an *exposition* of the foundational conflict, which here appears to be a choice between soap or booze. The Baron's entry is due to a 'coincidence', i.e. to the author's need of him. Only at the end of the act is the leading project introduced – and it is not the leading character's project, namely to test Jeppe as a ruler, but just for fun, not as a social or ideological experiment. Strictly speaking, the first act is superfluous, given that it mostly presents secondary premises up to the point where the actual plot starts. The unity of place is broken when Jeppe in the second act has been moved to the Baron's castle. When he wakes up, he thinks he is dead and has gone to Paradise. A *complication* should now



occur. But there is no clear indication of a fundamental conflict in the first act, and so it is hard to find any complication, even though Jeppe is faced with a dilemma; is he a poor peasant or a powerful lord? In the third act the illusion threatens to defeat reality in a strong *confrontation* with the increasingly menacing Jeppe. The Baron draws the ideological conclusion at the end of the act, on premises that we hear about only now, thus eventually rendering the rest of the play, and particularly the moralizing epilogue, superfluous. In the fourth act Jeppe is back on the dungheap and a new story begins, including the rather obscure trial. The act stands for *desperation*. But in relation to what? The leading character's project should be in trouble. However, it remains an open question whether he has one. In the fifth act a kind of *solution* to the leading conflict should appear. Instead, a lot of confusion is presented. After Jeppe's mock execution the judge condemns him back to life (!), and Jeppe wants to sleep his way back to Paradise. The epilogue repeats what the audience should have learnt.

From a formal point of view this is problematic. Compared to the ruling standards the comedy's structure is a disaster. In his *Epistel* 66<sup>19</sup> Holberg states that the classical unities should be respected, and so he does himself, he claims, although there are some stories that can only be told if one disrespects the rules; and he mentions as an example the story of the drunken peasant. The French-classicistic drama model built on order and coherence, all details served to reach the end point, the central meaning – a well-oiled machine, comparable in a way to the principles of the centralized state machinery. In the text order is represented by the Baron. Contrary to what Holberg says, it would not have been impossible to respect the unities of time and place, beginning for instance with the events in the second act, clarifying the motive of the Baron's experiment and concluding with the dethroning of Jeppe. The narrative does not present any insurmountable obstacles that prevent it from being transformed into a stringent dramatic shape.

From a didactic and ideological point of view Holberg's project is congruent with the Baron's project. The epilogue's rhymed Alexandrine verses are very clear. The message is eventually a defence of the traditional social and political hierarchy; tyranny is an inevitable consequence of power given all of a sudden to a low ranking, unprepared person. In society as well as in the individual blind instinct has to be controlled by *ratio*. A wise patriarchal regime is a simple necessity. A father figure is needed. The antagonist of the Baron, Jeppe, represents chaos, and so does the structure. Structure implies optics, it prescribes a point of view that gets projected to the audience and thus creates a point of identification. So due to the 'chaotic' structure, that furthermore refers to fairy-tale patterns and carnivalesque upside-down displacements, Jeppe becomes an identification figure, contrary to the explicit thematic and ideological intentions in the text. This circumstance is reinforced by Jeppe's initial addresses to the audience, making them his confidantes, and by his witty comments to the authorities; being a clown,



his mere presence throws a comic light on the others, thus representing the theatre's 'Italian' aspect.<sup>20</sup> In the end his fantasies, or carnivalesque ideas, are brutally unveiled as staged delusions. The comedy ends in a didactic conclusion addressed to the spectators, but not in harmony. The apparent incoherencies evoke a dialogue with the different voices' contradictions and confidences, in a process where it is up to the spectators to fill in and react to gaps and illogic in the dramaturgical construction. This tension between theme and structure is linked to the material space, the three-dimensional, scenic context that involves interplay with an actual audience.

The actual auditorium contained c. 500 seats in three floors, with parterre, boxes and a gallery. A number of seats – around twenty in all, and not the cheapest ones – were placed on the stage. The parterre which made up the front section of the floor was standing room and was known as a place for reactions and opinions, and life in the boxes was not unilaterally focused on what took place on the stage. The lighting in the auditorium and on the stage was rather homogenous, with a particularly illuminated area around the footlights where the acting took place.<sup>21</sup> The characters' reflections thus in a way became dialogues, discussions with the audience. This means that the auditorium and the stage made up one space of festivity and illusion rather than two separated dimensions. The theatrical performance was a dynamic interaction and thus a three-dimensional materialization of Holberg's fundamental dialogical strategy, literally ruled by the openness, the texts are written into and unfold. Apart from this, what makes the stage an extraordinarily suitable instrument in his hands, is the fact that illusion and reality are crucial themes in his philosophy. Illusion is the stuff the stage is made on. The stage represents his thematized and materialized philosophy.

Even though the case of *Jeppe paa Bierget* is extreme in terms of incoherencies and paradoxes, those features are recurrent as constituent parts of Holberg's 'Socratic' dialogical technique. In *Erasmus Montanus*, the title character is self-sufficient and arrogant; however, he is forced by the representative of reason to deny what is evidently right, namely that the earth is round. *Masquerade* involves an apology for the usefulness of what strictly speaking seemed useless and which furthermore had been prohibited by the authorities. 'Though this be madness, yet there is method in't', Polonius says in *Hamlet*. Here the madness appears to be the method. In a way theatre, anchored as it is in imagination, is madness in three dimensions. So far it is the ideal instrument for Holberg's dialectic philosophy and practice.

## Theatre and theatricality

To Holberg comedy was a powerful forum for discussions of civil and social customs, for satire against superstition and self-sufficiency and particularly against theatricality in human behaviour. Furthermore, the theatrical space was an appropriate instrument for the manifestation of a fundamental philosophical theme concerning illusion as an existential condition.



Apart from the strictly theatrical implications, related to the material stage and to the play texts, theatre as a principle imbues large parts of the oeuvre virtually from the very beginning. This applies to fiction as well as non-fiction and shows up in terms, themes and metaphors, existential, philosophical and cultural. References to mask, play, comedy, actor are recurrent. Holberg almost seems to think in theatrical terms of *theatrum mundi*, of social and political life being as a kind of roleplaying. Popes, princes and politicians are said to play their roles. When it comes to moral philosophy, the *theatrum mundi* motif is substantial. It is no coincidence that he introduces his *Lives of Heroines* like this:

We must consider our life as a play in which each person has his role. An actor is not satisfied by having a great role but with having played it well . . . for the advantage and the honour does not consist in the honour of the role but in the execution of it. Everything that a ruler has through birth and circumstances may perhaps be called happiness, but it is no real glory, not what can wear the name of summum bonum, which consists of a lasting bliss whenever he considers that he honourably has promoted the prosperity of the subjects, and that he may say with Augustus: The play is over, applaud!<sup>22</sup>

State and stage merge.

As it explicitly represents a non-reality, theatre is the opposite of theatricality. *Epistel* 179 is another apology for theatre as being as necessary for the mind as eating and drinking are for the body. Asking why, in Catholic countries, actors are excommunicated while prostitutes are permitted, it describes the difference between the hypocrite and the actor:

both present feigned persons, but the former is feigning in order to deceive the world, the latter in order to disclose deceit and false virtue. Pope Sixtus 5th and Moliere were both great actors, but one would not hesitate to excommunicate the former and put the latter among the greatest philosophers.<sup>23</sup>

There is, however, more focus on self-deception than on deception in Holberg's writings, on the person who deceives himself rather than on the impostor, simply because that theme concerns the leading philosophical principle – 'know thyself'.

As for theatricality, in *theoretical* terms, Holberg is sceptical concerning the significance of overt behaviour or staging. He declares it to be an example of 'indifferent things' when it is assumed to be 'greatly significant whether one takes communion kneeling or sitting, whether one transacts the ceremony in white or black dress',<sup>24</sup> thus deliberately devaluing the impact of the physical appearance or performance, on both the performing and the observing part. This is a Lutheran position, focused on text and meaning



and not infrequently aimed at the Catholic Church's alleged theatricality. 'When something is not real, it becomes nothing but a play, irrespective of what name it is given and with what finery and decency it is conducted',<sup>25</sup> as one of his reflections on ceremonial staging concludes. Similarly, as we have seen, he argued for a theatre not primarily for the eyes, but for the ears, though in a reasonable balance between intellect and entertainment. His polemical attacks on a theatre for the eyes concerned spectacular German baroque shows and Italian farces. Three decades later, in the *Epistels*, Holberg makes sarcastic remarks about the soporific 'dry conversations' in new French plays.<sup>26</sup> They consist of text and thus lack theatrical life. The role of the ears depends partly on the polemic position.

On the other hand, as a *practitioner*, when it came to theatre and not just theatricality, he was well aware of the fact that text is not the primary agent on the stage. According to 'Justesen', the playwright must be able to imagine the play's effect when put on stage, 'for sometimes the comedy that is most entertaining to read may be the least agreeable in the theatre; jokes and funny ideas may lack that which cannot easily be described but yet makes the stage lively',<sup>27</sup> that is the physical dramaturgical *situation*. Even if the play's fundamental conflict concerns a moral principle, it has to be translated into concrete actions and circumstances in order to function on the stage. Frequently, Holberg's characters are driven by physical needs and obstacles, and their mental state is reflected in their physical condition. 'My limbs are at war with each other',<sup>28</sup> the drunk and desperate Jeppe exclaims as he disintegrates into incoherence. The corrupt poet Rosiflengius in *The Happy Shipwreck* is not only a moral cripple, he is also ornated with a conspicuous hump. An indication of Holberg's precise awareness of the effect of the non-verbal stage language is found in a reflection in the satirical poem *Apology for the Bard Tigellius* from 1722. The thought that Diogenes might have been a 'Pantomimus' leads to the observation that:

Diogenes, when he the empty barrel rolls  
Moralises more, plays more with the world  
Than Plato, Socrates and many a sermoniser,  
Truth he speaks not with tongue but with gesture.<sup>29</sup>

The dialectical and paradoxical strategies observed in his dramaturgical practice reflect his notion of the Socratic method. In the preface to *Church History*, he says – with an implicit self-portrait – that:

Socrates, who maintained that more could be effected by a lesson drawn in jest than by the most violent sermons, conducted nothing but entertaining dialogues that must be viewed virtually as plays. Those who infer from this that he was a particularly entertaining and jolly man do not know him properly. There is no doubt that if he had found some



other form of moralizing more powerful, his moral lesson would have been as austere as that of Seneca.<sup>30</sup>

In his autobiography the self-portrait is explicit:

I prefer to give useful exhortations and advice in the form of entertaining dialogues and comedies rather than by severe orders like a school master . . . In order to convince the errant I follow the method of Socrates: I don't attack the castles directly but through tunnels. I make people see truth by means of poetry, stories and parables . . . Yet people do not count me among the philosophers.<sup>31</sup>

Human performance seen in the perspective of what he calls the natural state is the very core of Holberg's comedy. This idea is, however, ambiguous. On the one hand it appears to be a pre-civilized primary condition, more genuine and authentic than the layers of secondary constructions, such as customs, fashions and conventions, that culture has added to nature. This is an ancient topos put to renewed use in the kind of natural law that Holberg imbibed early. A notion of equality is associated with that version of the natural state, a disrespect of purely formal hierarchies. This becomes clear in connection with for example *Masquerade*. Masquerade is a phenomenon that in one point of view is a waste of money and time, in short, useless. Nevertheless, Holberg's comedy is an apology, and not only for pragmatic, also for philosophical reasons. The latter becomes clear when we compare with a philosophical essay, *Epistel* 347, in which he discusses the significance of masks and masking. Here he talks about

the condition in which man is put by God's original creation and from which he has fallen through sin. In this perspective one could say that the ordinary state in which we live is a constant masquerade, since governments, fashions and habits impose masks on us which we sort of take off in such plays [masquerades], and that we are not really masked except when we go with open face.<sup>32</sup>

Here culture implies restrictions and restraints of nature. The mask implies an unmasking of the masque, a liberation from the tight reins of artifice. In the same way theatre should unveil theatricality. The mask is a metaphor. But on the stage it is also an object which may imply visual dialectics. In *Ulysses von Ithacia*, the bizarre staging of a heroic-classical universe is unveiled as an illusion by the masked person, Chilian, i.e. Harlequin. The regime's staging of itself involved '*ancien*' mythological references and imageries. So when the masked comedian unmasks the heroic masque, implicitly it also suggests the official theatricality.

On the other hand, human nature implies such blind and destructive forces that culture, civilization is needed to prevent chaos. Freedom is dangerous.



The individual is subject to irrational passions and instincts, but may be ruled by reason, restrained, cultivated, disciplined, by social life. Nature must be bridled. The same applies to the State, where the absolute ruler has to steer the vessel clear of chaos and disruption. That is the theme of *Jeppe of the Hill*. Those two complementary positions are present simultaneously in Holberg's thought and in his application of the art of theatre to life and history. Chaos is a basic condition in a permanent dialogue with culture and civilization, for good or for bad.

The figure of the fool, the central character in the comic genre, is likewise ambiguous. Basically two kinds of fools can be distinguished. On one hand the fool, and on the other the Fool, with a capital letter. The fool is the one who is made a fool of and makes a fool of himself, he who is ridiculous because of his lack of self-awareness, loss of sense of reality and who is easily fooled, exactly because he cannot tell illusion from reality. He has some defect of character, a blind spot, which prevents him from 'knowing himself', as it is put with almost manic repetition and obvious reference to basic Socratic ideas. Not knowing oneself implies to 'take the shell for the kernel' or, with a Platonic allusion, 'to take the shadow for the man'. 'Shadow' means illusion in the sense of hollow staging. That goes for the upper classes' delusion, as well as the credulity of the common people. Regardless of social standing, whoever lives under an illusion may be deceived, fooled, manipulated. The Fool on the other hand is the representative of unsentimental, unsophisticated 'natural' common sense, that makes a fool of the fool. Quite a few of the Fools in the comedies are creative, quick-witted maids. It seems natural to read this fundamental constellation in the light of Don Quijote versus Sancho Panza, given that from the very beginning Holberg's favourite reading was *Don Quijote* by Cervantes. In *Ulysses von Ithacia*, the harlequinesque fool Chilian represents 'natural' reason, while the chivalric Ulysses is depicted as an incarnation of pompous affectation. Even though the didactic mechanism sometimes is the work of reasonable authority, as in *The Political Tinker*, *Jeppe of the Hill* or *Erasmus Montanus*, the fundamental contrast between being witty and down-to-earth and being self-important is recurrent. Jeppe is a more complex character. He has the flaw of being a drunkard and too imaginative. His tendency to deny reality makes him defenceless against the intrigue played on him. Jeppe is a fool. He stands for chaos and blind instinct, related to the more problematic aspects of the natural state. But he is also a Fool, who unmaskes and ridicules the others' weaknesses. He incarnates a kind of comic chaos which connotes the unspoiled state of nature.

The didactic strategy frequently consists in outdoing the fool's foolishness in order, hopefully, to make him realize his self-deception. And furthermore, the enormity of the main character's foolishness is meant to confront the spectator with his own ridiculousness, his irrational ideas and behaviour. So far the comic stage is a mirror of folly. It both represents and presents foolishness and thus stands for a Socratic challenge to the audience, a comic provocation.



Contrary to the insistence on structures and hierarchies in Holberg's theoretical works, the father figures in his comedies are repeatedly ridiculed. The father is often the fool. The comedies differ from the histories and the *Law of Nature* where respect for paternal and social authority is seen as essential to prevent dissolution and anarchy. Similarly, the ideal of philosophical stoicism, the endeavour for self-control and equanimity, which is a main theme in Holberg's theory is generally reduced to nothing but theory in his comedies. Conversely, sheer mad foolishness holds a value of its own. Folly in the comedies is 'as necessary as oiling the wheels of the waggon and having a drink with one's food',<sup>33</sup> says 'Justesen'. In *Moral Reflections*, two decades later, Holberg goes even further in his argumentation for the indispensability of madness, when he states:

I for my part would not care to live in a country without fools. For a fool has the same effect in civil society as ferment in a person's stomach. It is like a useful salt that stirs blood and humours. Indeed, it is like a storm which, although it tears down houses and trees, does also at the same time clean the air, hinders its putrefaction and forestalls the illnesses that too much quiet generates.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, catharsis by nonsense, energizing by madness; this is closer to carnivalism than to stoicism.

This is evidently the Socratic dialectician who takes up a paradoxical standpoint, but not just for the sport of it. The comedies can be understood as a teasing dialogue with the auditorium, obliging the audience to 'examine the matter' – a favourite expression – and possibly draw their own conclusions. As already suggested, some disharmonious imbalance is felt in *Jeppe of the Hill* between a sympathetic main character and the ideological rejection of him. The two levels do not match. The absence of unambiguous points of orientation is thematized in *Witchcraft or False Alarm* where, with reference to the ancient accusations against theatre, the actor finds himself suspected of being a sorcerer. The audience can observe, that while the entire town is convinced of knowing the truth but in reality is a prey to prejudice and acts irrationally, the actor, although he does not understand the situation at all, is able to act professionally, to keep his head and improvise and even to profit by the situation. Due to his ironic, unsentimental pragmatism the exponent of illusion manages to stick to reality and to navigate in the unpredictable *comédie humaine*.

The second of Holberg's *Four Satirical Poems*, written in the early 1720s, on the eve of the first comedies, contains various keys to this motif of uncertainty as a dramaturgical driving force. The poem is entitled *Apology for the Bard Tigellius*. In the form of a dialogue, it refers to Horace's depiction of the singer Tigellius, namely his complete incoherence and fickleness. One of the two interlocutors, called B, objects that this cannot be true, such a phenomenon cannot possibly exist in nature, it has to be a myth from



ancient times. Then a long and systematic deliberation ensues. Not only peoples, but also cities, nations, eras, actually the entire world, are imbued with unpredictability, A claims. Tigellius is an icon and a metaphor, not an exaggeration or an exception. He is a true mirror: 'In him one's own failings are seen and felt'.<sup>35</sup>

Tigellius could be seen as a 'Pantomimus', an actor, a comedian, A continues. He 'was without a mask', he 'followed his own nature', he was simply 'a human being', and as such a condensation, a synthesis of qualities that are inherent in mankind. Some persons manage to maintain the mask, an externally disciplined shape and shell, but it is empty, an illusion, the truth behind it is chaotic. Tigellius is the true image of the world's actual status, the one who shows up the idea of constancy and stability. 'His clever censor was himself a masked fool'; not the singer but his critic, Horace, is a fool wearing a mask. Horace is described as a 'Proteus', with that name's connotations of 'versatile', 'mutable' and – 'theatre'! Although Tigellius is called a 'Pantomimus', whose presence and behaviour represents a philosophical performance of the truth about man, the true comedian is Horace, the representative of order and rationality which turn out to be an illusion. Tigellius stands for theatre. Horace for theatricality. Tigellius is the Fool. Horace is the fool.

The poem concludes in a number of synthesized reflections on human incoherence and imbalance, concluding in the key formulation:

When we ridicule others, we only befool ourselves  
Nobody is seen to keep the golden mean  
For in every man there is a strange chaos

The philosophical laughter thus conveys the 'know yourself' theme. Finally, Mr A asks the initially sceptical Mr B:

What, then, may one sensibly call a person?  
Which definition do you think fittest?

And Mr B has to surrender:

I cannot form a better definition  
Than an indefinable animal.<sup>36</sup>

Man is an indefinable animal. The poem is a satire levelled at Horace and an apology in favour of Tigellius. It concludes by stating that the only reliably stable condition is mutability. The central zone of this world view is Chaos, cosmic as well as individual, including a microcosm/macrocosm model, as the inconstancy of the world is reflected in the individual.

The comedy *The Vacillating Woman* presents a female character that is the incarnation of lack of logic, reason and consistency, and as such by definition a ridiculous and reprehensible character. However, when she is



made a parallel to the singer Tigellius, maybe the fool gets a trace of a Fool. In his memoirs, the author calls her 'an unsteady woman of Tigellian stamp'.<sup>37</sup>

As already suggested, the theatre was fickle and therefore in dogmatic eyes suspicions. From a theological point of view, the constant changing of shapes and identities, the perpetual activity in the realm of fiction, was mendacious and suspicious. The great variety of voices and views, the playing with roles and masks, that constitute the comedies' universe, do not belie that argument, nor does the author's own playing with different names and masks.

## Conclusion

Theatre and comedy are crucial factors in Holberg's artistic and intellectual strategies. On the one hand, theatre represents a powerful way of moralizing, a didactic instrument with a specific ability to display illusion versus reality literally in three dimensions involving the audience's imagination; and on the other, it implies a loss of orientation, a dialectic challenge or even vertigo. Civilization on the one hand is needed as a safeguard against chaos; on the other hand, it represents a kind of theatricality, an illusory play of masks, where the authentic dimension beneath the mask consists of constant inconstancy, a state of continuous transformation.

Theatre was looked upon by the authorities, the university and the church with suspicion. It was by definition considered to be immoral and offensive. It represented falseness, implied relativity, and was as such conceived as a menace to fundamental truths. The defence therefore had to argue in favour of the theatre's social and moral value, stressing its usefulness, including the usefulness of its uselessness. On the one hand, it is advanced that theatre deals with moral issues in educational and pedagogical ways, trying to adjust and correct defects, flaws and dysfunctions, socially, intellectually, psychologically; and on the other hand, that madness, irrationality, is a basic human condition, a need and a necessity. In *Apology for the Bard* Tigellius it was thus claimed that the unpredictable, unstable singer represents normality. *Moral Reflections* sharpens the paradox, saying that truth is a subjective matter. When a person has bought himself a title of honour:

he seems rather to deserve condolences than congratulations, since he is parting with something that is considered real and in return is getting but a name and the shadow of a thing; but when it truly pleases him, it is no longer a shadow but is becoming a reality . . . For everything that is good in one's imagination is in fact good, just as everything that is bad in imagination is in fact bad. He who imagines he is sick, is sick. Likewise an imagined greatness is a real one . . . If someone after earnest application to the high authorities has been granted the privilege of wearing a china pot instead of a hat on his head, and he is truly pleased with this, I would not hesitate to congratulate him.<sup>38</sup>



Apparently we have to do with an endless number of contradictions, but only apparently. The work has to be understood at different levels and in light of different strategies. The immediate level refers to passions and instincts that belong to a dimension of irrationality which has to be disciplined in order to produce useful citizens. However, beneath this rationality is found a more complex philosophical assumption about the nature of the pre-moral condition. Acknowledgement of the relativity of supposedly absolute truths may open up for a tolerant attitude towards other forms of understanding, faith, or conviction. In this connection, theatre assumes a significant position, as a metaphor and as an actual activity which challenges the spectator by means of its 'chaotic' complexity.

## Notes

- 1 The literature on Holberg's plays is extensive and nearly all in either Danish or Norwegian. Standard works include Hans Brix, *Ludvig Holbergs Komедier. Den danske Skueplads* (Copenhagen: 1942); Bent Holm, *Holberg på tværs. Fra forskning til forestilling* (Copenhagen: 2013); Anne E. Jensen, *Teatret i Lille Grønnegade 1722–8* (Copenhagen: 1972); Torben Krogh, *Holberg i Det kongelige Teaters ældste Regieprotokoller* (Copenhagen: 1943); Eiler Nystrom, *Den danske Komедies Oprindelse. Om Skuepladsen og Holberg* (Copenhagen, Kristiania: 1918).
- 2 Cf. *Theater und Heilkunst*, ed. Gerda Baumbach (Köln, Weimar, Berlin: 2002); Günther Hansen, *Formen der Commedia dell'arte in Deutschland* (Emsdetten: 1984).
- 3 The arguments are found in the protocols of the *Consistorium* for 1722 and in the theological *responsa* from 1749, in Bent Holm, *Skal dette være Troja? Om Holberg i virkeligheden* (Copenhagen: 2004), 42–47, 194–205. As for the effeminacy argument, see Holberg, *Nye-Aars Prologus til en Comoedie* (Copenhagen: 1723), a3v and a4r.
- 4 Holberg, *Nye-Aars Prologus*, a2r.
- 5 See Charles Urbain and Eugène Levesque, *L'église et le théâtre* (Paris: 1930), 7–65, 277–306, for the texts by Caffaro, the Sorbonne reactions and Bossuet. Bossuet explicitly, 58, relates Plato's position.
- 6 'Just Justesens Betenkning over Comoedier', in *Hans Mickelsens Comoedier*, vol. I (Copenhagen: 1723), a6r.
- 7 Cf. Ernst Hövel, *Der Kampf der Geistlichkeit gegen das Theater in Deutschland im 17. Jahrhundert* (Münster: 1912), 71–72.
- 8 See Hövel, *Kampf der Geistlichkeit*, and Dorothea Schröder, *Zeitgeschichte auf der Opernbühne. Barockes Musiktheater in Hamburg im Dienst von Politik und Diplomatie (1690–1745)* (Göttingen: 1998).
- 9 *Dannemarks og Norges geistlige og verdslige Staat* [The Spiritual and Secular State of Denmark and Norway], 153–156.
- 10 Concerning the allusions to pietistic terms and notions, see Holm, *Skal dette være Troja?*, 175, 188–190.
- 11 *Hexerie eller Blind Allarm* in Holberg, *Den Danske Skue-Plads*, vol. I (Copenhagen: 1731), k3v–k4r.
- 12 *Epistel* 83.
- 13 Erik Pontoppidan, *Sandhed til Gudfrygtighed* (Copenhagen: 1737), 35.
- 14 As for Holberg's failure in Paris, see Bent Holm, 'Harlequin, Holberg and the (in)visible masks: *Commedia dell'arte* in eighteenth-century Denmark', *Theatre*



- Research International* 23 (1998): 159–166; about Holberg's fate in Germany, see Carl Roos, *Det 18. Aarhundredes Oversættelser af Holbergs Komædier. Deres Oprindelse, Karakter og Skæbne* (Copenhagen: 1922), and Vivian Greene-Gantzberg, 'Ludvig Holberg and German-Speaking Europe', in *Ludvig Holberg: A European Writer. A Study in Influence and Reception*, ed. Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: 1994), 67–104.
- 15 'Fortale' [Preface] in Holberg, *Den Danske Skue-Plads*, iv.
- 16 *Uden Hoved og Hale* in *Hans Mickelsens Comoedier*, vol. III (Copenhagen: 1725), R1r.
- 17 *Plutus* in *Den danske Skueplads*, vol. VI (Copenhagen: 1753).
- 18 *Jeppe paa Bierget* in *Hans Mickelsens Comoedier*, vol. I, M3r–P1v.
- 19 In *Epistler*, I, 358.
- 20 When the German travelling troupes put *Jeppe of the Hill* on their repertoire, it was with Harlequin in the title role, cf. Roos, *18. Aarhundredes Oversættelser*, 3 and 103.
- 21 Cf. Eiler Nystrøm, *Den danske Komædies Oprindelse*, 189–206.
- 22 *Adskillige Heltinders Og Navnkundige Damers Sammenlignede Historier* (Copenhagen: 1745), 18–19.
- 23 *Epistler*, II, 430.
- 24 *Epistler*, I, 406.
- 25 *Moralske Tanker*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: 1744), I, 205; also II, 604.
- 26 *Epistler* Nos. 190, 249, 288, 441, 447 and 495.
- 27 'Fortale', *Hans Mickelsens Comoedier*, I, a5r.
- 28 *Jeppe paa Bierget*, M8v.
- 29 *Fire Skiemte-Digte* (Copenhagen: 1722), b8v.
- 30 Holberg, *Almindelig Kierke-Historie* (Copenhagen: 1738), c2r.
- 31 Holberg, 'Ad virum perillustrem epistola tertia' (Copenhagen: 1743), 44.
- 32 Holberg, *Epistler* IV, 163–164. The idea of an original time is also found in his *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 343.
- 33 'Fortale', *Hans Mickelsens Comoedier* I, a2v.
- 34 Holberg, *Moralske Tanker*, I, 128; cf. 281–282: 'Don Quixot was happy because he imagined that the whole world trembled for him . . . [And] I think that . . . the philosophical axiom [that only the wise man is happy] may be inverted so that one may say, more or less, Solos stultos esse beatos. That is, only fools are happy in this world.'
- 35 *Fire Skiemte-Digte*, b8v.
- 36 Holberg, *Fire Skiemte-Digte*, c3r.
- 37 Holberg, *Ad virum perillustrem epistola*, 135.
- 38 Holberg, *Moralske Tanker*, I, 170 and 175.



Part III

# Histories





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## 8 History: national, universal and dynastic

*Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen*

In 1730, aged 45 and after thirteen years as a professor at the University of Copenhagen, first of metaphysics and then of eloquence (Latin literature), Ludvig Holberg achieved his heart's desire and settled down in the chair of history. Already in 1737, two years after finishing his monumental *History of Denmark* (3 volumes 1732–5), he became treasurer of the University and consequently was relieved of his teaching obligations. Nevertheless, history was no mere seven years' interlude in his life. It is quite literally correct to say that he was an historian first and last, that is from his first published work, the *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States* (1711), to his last, the *Remarks on some Positions found in L'Esprit des Loix* (1753), a very historically minded rejoinder to Montesquieu. Even his famed 'poetical raptus' bears an historical stamp in the sense that his debut, the verse mock-epic *Peder Paars* (1719–20), is a travesty not only of Virgil's *Aeneid*, itself an historical epic, but also of antiquarian style history (cf. chapter 6).

So Holberg was an historian, 'an old inhabitant of the historical country' as he said on one occasion,<sup>1</sup> and a very successful and industrious one at that. His historical works amount to more than half of his total literary output or about 11,000 pages, mostly in octavo. But what sort of historian was he? What was his theoretical outlook, his practice, his style and his political agenda? How does he stand in relation to mainstream historical scholarship of his age and to the long-term development of the discipline at large? Put briefly, Holberg was a gentleman historian, a 'pragmatic' historian and an historian informed by moral philosophy in the vein of classical natural law thinkers, such as Grotius and Pufendorf. He has been compared to the slightly later figures of Voltaire and David Hume, but rather than being cast as the precursor who does not quite measure up to these paragons of later Enlightenment, he should be understood on his own terms and those of his time.<sup>2</sup>

### An overview of his historical works

Even if the sheer volume of Holberg's historical authorship precludes detailed treatment of every work, a short presentation of his oeuvre is useful. The first



and largest group consists of general histories that present well known material for the benefit of the growing Danish reading public. This includes his debut, *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States* (1711) followed by a topographical *Supplement to the Historical Introduction* (1713), a *General Church History* (1738) and a *Jewish History* (1742).

According to Holberg himself the decision to become an author was taken while studying in the Bodleian Library during his stay in Oxford 1706–8. He had planned a general geographical handbook with short historical outlines but was forestalled by a Danish translation of a lengthy German geographical work. This made him change plans and settle for the aforementioned *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States*. His historical debut thus represents a sort of rescue operation for a literary career that threatened to falter before it even had started.

The second group is made up of national history and consists of his *Description of Denmark and Norway* (1729), which includes a substantial chapter on the history of the Danish kings, followed a few years later by the magnum opus *History of Denmark* (3 volumes 1732–5). This ambitious work was the first general history of Denmark for 100 years, the only comparable antecedents being Arild Huitfeldt's ten-volume *Chronicle of Denmark* (1595–1604) and comprehensive Latin histories of Denmark by Johannes Pontanus and Johannes Meursius from the 1630s.<sup>3</sup> Because of its size and position and because several other historical works will be dealt with in other chapters (cf. chapters 5, 9 and 10), the following presentation of Holberg as an historian will be based mainly on the *History of Denmark*. To this group could also be added a couple of minor works; the *Description of Bergen* (1737), his hometown in Norway, and *The Maritime History of Denmark and Norway. First Period* (1747) which recycles much material from his earlier works.

The third group occupies a middle position between history and moral philosophy and consists of two quite successful collections of paired biographies after the model of Plutarch: *Lives of Heroes* (1739) and of *Lives of Heroines* (1745) (cf. chapter 5).

A small fourth group consists of a Latin textbook for grammar schools and university students called *Compendium of Universal History* (1733), the only one of his historical works that was translated into English (1755).

A fifth miscellaneous group is made up of academic and polemic writings and consists of the parodic *Fifth Dissertation on Danish Historians* (1719, in Latin), actually a bitter critique of his rival Andreas Hojer's *Short Danish History* (1717, in German), the polemical *Holger Danske's Letter to Burman* (1727, in Latin), an academic oration *On Hypotheses on Danish history* (1731, in Latin), a long essay on *Conjectures on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans* (1746, French edition 1752), a critical *Letter on the Mémoires on Queen Christine* (1752, in French), which answers criticism of Holberg by Queen Christina's Swedish biographer Johan Arckenholtz (1751).





Figure 8.1 Frontispiece from Holberg's literary debut, *Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States* (1711). Three gentlemen, one of them in a housecoat (the host?), presumably discussing politics with reference to the map on the table. Winged Fame blows her trumpet with the banner 'Europæische Historia'. The German text might indicate that Holberg's printer copied a foreign engraving, but the scene very well evokes the sort of ideal public Holberg and his model, Samuel Pufendorf, wrote for: the secular, well-educated political and administrative elite. Photo: Kristoffer Schmidt from the collection of Sorø Akademi.



### Gentleman historian

By far the greater part of Holberg's prodigious literary output (group one to three and parts of five) consists of books in Danish aimed at the general public, which received them so well that they became a commercial success. Nearly all of it was also published in German, some of it in Dutch and Swedish, a few titles in French and only the *Compendium* in English. Only four small pieces are in Latin and none of them can be termed scholarly in the strict sense. He did not have any privileged access to source material in the Royal Library or the Geheimearchiv (National Archives) but wrote his works on the basis of printed sources and manuscript material in private collections in Copenhagen.

He did include footnotes and occasional discussion of sources and rival interpretations in some of his works but, except for the third volume of his *History of Denmark*, he did not quote documents much and he seldom quoted them in their full length. His main concern was not with documentation and criticism but with narrative flow and political and moral interpretation.

Holberg did not write in the official persona of a royal historiographer,<sup>4</sup> or as an antiquarian conversing with kindred spirits in the higher reaches of the international republic of letters. He operated as a private author in the nascent public sphere of his home country, the twin kingdoms of Denmark and Norway, and to some extent also the Germanic Roman Empire. For these reasons Holberg, in spite of his academic position and in spite of his staunch loyalty to the ruling absolutist regime, is best understood as a sort of 'gentleman historian' who interacted primarily with the general reading public and only occasionally with academic or literary peers.

### Pragmatic history

If the epithet gentleman historian pinpoints Holberg's social role as an author, the concept of pragmatic history defines his style.<sup>5</sup> The term 'pragmatic' goes back to the Greek historian Polybius where it means as much as practical, useful history, that is history with a moral and political lesson. The subject matter of this type of history was war and politics, its form was narrative, its style was plain and pure and its ideal author was an experienced man of the world who would write the history of his own times, especially but not exclusively the events in which he himself had taken part. By the early Enlightenment the concept of pragmatic history had expanded to mean a coherent narrative, dealing with a broad range of subjects but still focusing on the main events and characters of political life, pleasing to read but not rhetorically elaborate, replete with moral and political wisdom but not excessively didactic.

Pragmatic history should not be lumped together with what is sometimes referred to as 'the exemplar theory of history', epitomized by Lord Bolingbroke in his famous but utterly conventional dictum that 'history is philosophy teaching by examples'.<sup>6</sup> Neither should it be confused with the



Renaissance tradition of rhetorical history in which the classical tradition of set piece speeches played a pivotal role.<sup>7</sup> Pragmatic history kept to the middle ground between these two but also held a conscious distance to antiquarian style history which Holberg never tired of ridiculing.

Even if the retired statesman was still seen as the ideal pragmatic historian, extensive reading, travels and impartiality had joined the list of qualifications for the would-be historian and thus opened the door for intellectuals with only second-hand experience of high politics. In other words, pragmatic history was characterized by the ambition not only to tell a true story in an entertaining way but also to explain, to judge and to teach, and the author could be anyone with the right education and moral character.<sup>8</sup>

Holberg fully subscribed to this ideal even if he did not call himself a pragmatic historian (he knew the concept but probably rejected the word as foreign). That much is clear from the long foreword, 'Deliberation on Histories' that precedes the third and final volume of his *History of Denmark*. Here he sums up:

For history is something quite different from what people usually imagine, which is something that is written as a pastime, so you see most people alternate between playing cards and reading histories to kill time, as it were, and to have something amusing to do during the long winter nights. But it is surely not primarily for this reason that good histories are written but in order to instruct and to be a mirror where you can see things past and judge those to come, get to know yourself as well as others and acquire the most solid knowledge in morals, constitutional law and politics, and it is especially in this regard that the reading of histories is recommended to rulers and persons of quality as the most important of secular studies.<sup>9</sup>

He also had something to say about the style and contents of history:

In this work of mine I have sought to instruct rather than to please and have therefore been most painstaking in those matters that inform about the domestic condition of the country, yet I have not forgotten to enliven the subject matter in order to arouse the attention of the reader even in those things that normally tend to lull him to sleep. It is with this in mind that an historian ought most diligently to sharpen his quill and exercise his powers if he wants to succeed in the so-called dry and less pleasing yet most important matters. The art of it consists in this: that he with a lively style explains the serious matters that he mentions and that he does not mention anything but what deserves to be explained, that is to say that he speaks of nothing but the ordinances that deal with the state, religion, commerce, the manners of the age and suchlike.<sup>10</sup>

So much for Holberg's theory. How does it relate to his practice?



## Narrative history

The backbone of Holberg's *History of Denmark* is traditional dynastic history; ruler after ruler is introduced with a few words on upbringing and character followed by a sketch of the political situation at the beginning of the reign. Then the main events are narrated in chronological order, year by year, rounded off with a general evaluation and character portraits of the ruler, the main political players and other great men. This narrative is interspersed with small passages on constitutional, juridical, ecclesiastical or economic matters and with 'impartial' deliberations or assessments ('Betænkning', 'Anmærkning') of events and characters. When necessary the strict chronological structure is broken, e.g. in a character portrait or when dealing with the background of a conflict, but Holberg is careful not to interrupt the narrative pace for too long or too often.

This basic narrative structure is wholly traditional and is found in numerous other national histories before and after Holberg, for example in François Eudes de Mézeray's *Histoire de France* (1648) and David Hume's *The History of England* (1754–62). More original was Holberg's division of Danish history not into dynasties but five periods, an invention he was immensely proud of:

- 1 Pagan antiquity until the death of King Sweyn Forkbeard in 1014.
- 2 The Christian Middle Ages from Canute the Great until the Kalmar union 1398.
- 3 The vicissitudes of the Kalmar union between Denmark, Norway and Sweden until the expulsion of Christian II in 1523.
- 4 The age of Reformation and noble predominance until 1648.
- 5 The reign of Frederick III 1648–70 including the transition to Absolutism 1660.

The first period is introduced by a short discussion of rival chronologies of Danish history but the following four begin with a general summary of the main events and trends of the preceding period. These period introductions function as starting points of the ensuing narrative and should be understood as an elaboration of, rather than a break with, the narrative form which Holberg, like all pragmatic historians, maintained. Surprisingly, Holberg also stuck stubbornly to this scheme when he reached the termination of the fifth period, which therefore ends with the usual evaluation of Frederick III and a few pages of miscellaneous remarks on his queen Sophie Amalie, their children, the university and church policy in the duchies Schleswig and Holstein. In other words, Holberg's *History of Denmark* does not really end, it only stops.

Modern historians with a more systematic bent of mind and a concomitant low regard of narrative have sought to read their own social science ideals of history into Holberg's work.<sup>11</sup> In this they have been misled by Holberg's



own words cited above, about concentrating on 'matters that inform about the interior state of the country'. However, a study of Holberg's practice reveals that he never tried to break with narrative history and that matters pertaining to the 'interior state of the country' do not mean socio-economic history but, as he explains himself, some constitutional history, church history, trade history and a little cultural history.

### On strong women and brisk kings

Another characteristic trait of Holberg's historical works was his recurrent character portraits. Not only rulers but great men and women, virtuous as well as more problematic personalities, were singled out for praise, blame and occasional comparison. This is particularly evident in the *History of Denmark* but can be found full blown already in the *Description of Denmark and Norway* where 'the great and brisk king Christian IV' (ruled 1588/96–1648), Holberg's all-time favourite king, was compared with the Swedish warrior king Gustavus II Adolphus (ruled 1611–32). Even if Christian IV lost most of his battles he was nevertheless the greater of the two because he was great in adversity as well as in prosperity.<sup>12</sup>

These character sketches were an entirely conventional feature of contemporary historiography which Holberg occasionally overdid somewhat, especially when he indulged in his predilection for strong women. Queen Margaret (ruled 1375/88–1412), the architect of the Kalmar Union between Denmark, Sweden and Norway, 'was one of the greatest rulers in history' and 'probably the most powerful ruler of Europe in her time'.<sup>13</sup> He praised her intelligence and quite bluntly stated that her successor, Eric of Pomerania 'made as much crooked as she had straightened out' because he disregarded her 'state-rule' (political principle) concerning the duchies Schleswig and Holstein.<sup>14</sup>

Holberg's fascination with queen Christina of Sweden (ruled 1644–54) was hardly less than with Margaret, but his verdict more mixed. He admired her superior intelligence and quick wit but criticized her inconstancy and dislike of all things Swedish. His last word on her was a rather unfavourable comparison with the contemporary Danish Queen Sophie Amalie (married to Frederick III, the first absolute king):

. . . the first [Queen Christina] seemed to be heroic but the latter [Queen Sophie Amalie] rather acted on it. The first had more state-maxims in her head, the latter put them better into practice. The first was more learned and had better understanding, the latter was wiser and showed better judgement. Queen Christina had such a love for manly qualities and pursuits that it seemed she loathed her own sex, Queen Sophie Amalie possessed and always exercised manly deeds but she was never ashamed of being a woman. Queen Christina was often seen at the head



of her troops in a man's clothes but only when no enemy was near, Queen Sophie Amalie, although dressed in woman's clothes, rode the ramparts of the besieged city [of Copenhagen], where bullets flew around the ears. So the latter always did a man's deeds without aspiring to a man's name while the former always aspired to a man's name even though she possessed all the frailty of a woman, for she was as great an example of fickleness and inconstancy as Sophie Amalie was of firmness and constancy.<sup>15</sup>

Later, Holberg developed the character portraits and comparisons further and turned them into a vehicle for his moral philosophy when he published *Lives of Heroes* (1739) and of *Lives of Heroines* (1745) (cf. chapter 5). The biographic element thus represents one of the central continuities between the historical and the philosophical parts of his oeuvre.

## Humour

Holberg was very conscious of matters of style, and he was entirely orthodox when, in the 'Deliberation on Histories', he protested, that 'the greatest ornament of history is simplicity, and the best historical style is that which differs most from an oratorical, academic or what is called didactic style'.<sup>16</sup> However, this passage, which is lifted *verbatim* from the introduction to father Gabriel Daniel's *Histoire de France* (1713), does not give any true idea of the peculiarities of Holberg's style.<sup>17</sup> The modern reader's first impression might not be the best guide either, distorted as it is by modern literary norms and prior knowledge of Holberg as the author of hilarious comedies. In this situation it is highly interesting that several contemporary readers thought that Holberg's historical style was fluent but also so replete with humour and colloquialisms that it clashed with appropriate historical gravity.<sup>18</sup>

Holberg's historical humour is not the subtle irony of Hume or Gibbon nor the barbed wit of Voltaire, rather it is an uncomplicated, colloquial, down-to-earth humour.<sup>19</sup> He pokes fun at ideologies, persons and institutions he dislikes, e.g. narrow minded nationalism, several Swedish kings and the Catholic church. Speaking about the Germanic tribes originating in Denmark (Cimbrians, Goths, Longobards, Normans and Angles) that ravaged and plundered across Europe during antiquity and the early Middle Ages, Holberg chooses the rather unheroic metaphor of the rolling snowball to illustrate how, during their travels, they accumulated several other nations eager for plunder.<sup>20</sup> When it comes to describing the decisive Cimbrian defeat at Vercelli 101 BC Holberg's style is remarkably detached: The Cimbrians' device of tying the front line fighters together is qualified as 'a ridiculous invention', and when they were defeated and the women killed their husbands, fathers, brothers, children and eventually themselves in order to inspire the Cimbrian fighters to finish the job and kill each other,



Holberg does not extoll their heroism and sense of honour but wryly comments: 'thus the Romans had no need to storm the encampment but only to give them time enough to hang themselves'.<sup>21</sup>

When Holberg rounds off the short chapter on the migrations (only thirty-seven pages), he seems to return to the traditional celebration of old Nordic bravery, but only for a moment. Instead he strains a comparison between the travelling habits of old and new Danes in order to end with a mercantilist balance-of-payment gag:

From these many and great migrations it can be seen that no nation under the sun has been more warlike and victorious than the old Danes. Their exploits fill most of the foreign chronicles and make up a considerable part of their histories. The reason for this was partly their natural valour, which did not allow them to stay quietly at home, partly a strong desire to see foreign countries which you may still observe to be a dominant passion with this nation, so as soon as children learn to speak, they begin planning travels abroad. There is only this difference between the old and the new Danes that the former travelled abroad in order to subjugate foreign countries or to come back with booty and riches. The latter on the contrary carry money out of the country. Therefore I think that if you could calculate what the old Danes had brought back and the new Danes had spent – and still daily spend – we might now have gotten even with the foreigners.<sup>22</sup>

Was this only a joke? Not at all. Twice in the *History of Denmark* and several times in his *Epistles* Holberg returned to the uselessness and wastefulness of grand tours and studies abroad, and once, in the Preface to Peder von Haven's *Travels in Russia* (1743), he praised the author as the exception that proved the rule that people bring back nothing but debt, affectation and the latest fashion from their travels.<sup>23</sup> This position is quite puzzling because Holberg himself travelled extensively in his youth and filled his autobiography with amusing anecdotes from his stays in England, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy.

At other times Holberg's humour takes the form of good natured asides, occasionally with an erotic flavour. Of King Svend Estridsen (ruled 1047–76) we learn that he:

was exceedingly kind even if his kindness sometimes went too far, especially towards the ladies-in-waiting, nearly all of whom he made pregnant, thereby fathering 13 bastards, among them Harald who succeeded him, and Knud whom he loved best, also Olaf, Erik and Niels who all in turn became kings of Denmark.<sup>24</sup>

Far more frequent than the amusing remarks on the follies of Danes past and present are the passages aimed at Sweden. Describing the relationship



between the Danish king Valdemar IV (ruled 1340–75) and the Swedish king Magnus Smek, Holberg observes that ‘this shrewd king [Valdemar] always had Magnus Smek in his pocket and could make him change his opinion any way he wanted to’.<sup>25</sup> Commenting on the political ambitions of the Swedish warrior king Charles X Gustavus (ruled 1654–60) Holberg observed that he ‘was pregnant with a fifth monarchy’ (originally an eschatological concept, here used to indicate the inflated and unrealistic character of the king’s policy).<sup>26</sup> We might see these and similar comments as quite innocent, but the colloquialism ‘had him in his pocket’ and ‘being pregnant’ – king Charles Gustavus was rather potbellied – was anything but respectful and a clear infringement of the law of historical gravity.

The most persistent objects of Holberg’s ridicule, however, was the Catholic church. Sometimes he combined his sarcasm with a moralising aside directed at his contemporaries:

[King Harald II (ruled 1014–18)] himself may have been very pious, but his piety consisted mostly in outward ceremonies like church attendance, genuflection, incense, which he thought was enough to make a good Christian, and unfortunately you still see many in our time who seem to be glued to the churches and scrupulously observe all Christian ceremonies but otherwise show little Christianity in their doings.<sup>27</sup>

Speaking of the decisive battle at Fodevig in 1135, which ended a civil war between rivalling branches of the royal dynasty, Holberg with evident indignation relates the doings of the clergy:

After this great battle, bishop Peter of Roskilde, bishop Thakke of Ribe, bishop Albert of Schleswig, Flocus of Århus and Henrik of Sweden together with 600 [in fact 60] priests were found on the battlefield. Together with other clergy they had been absolved from all their sins by archbishop Adser before the battle. From this can be seen the craft of the clergy of that age, and that many poor students had reason to be happy over such great battles where so many benefices became vacant on one day.<sup>28</sup>

But even when dealing with the Catholic church, Holberg’s humour could be just plain fun. Relating the story from an old Islandic manuscript chronicle of how king Eric I (ruled 1095–1103) on his way to the Holy Land had made a foundation at a monastery in Lucca in Italy providing for free wine and lodgings for all Danes passing by, Holberg added: ‘This chronicle ought to be printed solely for that reason and a copy sent to Lucca with a bill for so many years’ arrears’.<sup>29</sup> However, most of the time he simply ridicules the superstition, avarice, immorality and sheer stupidity of the medieval church.<sup>30</sup>

In the ‘Deliberation on Histories’ Holberg dealt at length with the question of impartiality (cf. below) but not with that of humour. Only once did he discuss his own predilection for humour and that was in the preface to his



*General Church History* (1738) where he tries to explain how his persistent satire on the Catholic church squares with his usual claim to impartiality:

But if one says: The author himself transgresses these rules [of impartiality] when he constantly ridicules the popes and the latterday clerics and monks, since he describes all that he finds laughable and disorderly about them, but passes by what is solid and good. To this I answer: God give that the church histories of those times were such that one could imagine a mixture of good and evil! On the field of tare you will harvest nothing but tare. The corruption of Christianity before the Reformation was so enormous that it is difficult to understand how so many vices and such ignorance could get the better of people, let alone Christians [. . .] One could therefore say that no history gives more inspiration to humour and that here I have adapted my pen to the subject matter, a point I have observed also in my other writings. [. . .] During the first three centuries, I find nothing but sound doctrine and Christian virtue, and for this reason my style follows the subject matter and is everywhere seemly and serious. But just as true piety, virtue and sound doctrine decline more and more in the Christian church, so the levity of my style increases. I have deemed it necessary to say this in order to account for my changing manner of writing.<sup>31</sup>

As a consequence of Holberg's ideological and national biases, the amusing remarks are mainly in the first half of his *History of Denmark* which deals with the Catholic Middle Ages and the Reformation. After a comical nadir in the reign of the 'great and brisk Christian IV'<sup>32</sup> (1588–1648), humour returns along with the Swedes in the last third of the work.<sup>33</sup>

## Relevance

Another significant stylistic element of Holberg's historical prose is his acute sense of relevance or rather his marked impatience with unnecessary details. A long section of the 'Deliberation on Histories' consists of the paired portraits of two types of historian, Historian A and B. Historian A is an author who, like Holberg, knows what is worthwhile and interesting. He focuses on the main events and characters, eschews ceremonial details as well as portents and in case of war gives an impartial and succinct account of the background, the major battles and the main points of the peace treaty. Historian B on the other hand piles up meaningless details, is biased and long-winded, and not a participant in a court ceremony, not a skirmish or an omen escapes him. Last but not least, historian A finds fruitful material in times of peace while historian B can only speak of war.

This sounds impressively modern but did Holberg practice what he preached? He was quite consistent in eschewing ceremonial details and even apologized the few times he did include some. His treatment of warfare and diplomacy is also generally impartial and succinct, even if his discipline is



clearly slacking in the third volume of the *History of Denmark*. On the other hand, the bulk of his history is concerned with war and diplomacy and, contrary to what one is led to expect from the 'Deliberation on Histories', times of peace are generally considered to be pleasant but also dry spots where there is 'little material to work on for an historian'.<sup>34</sup> What prevents his account from degenerating into a rather fast paced but monotonous string of events is the strong underlying plot (cf. grand narrative below) and the variety provided by his habit of spicing up the narrative with reflections, character portraits and miscellaneous bits of information on social, economic and cultural topics.

Holberg was certainly not the first to underline that the historian's task was not to amass but to select and present information. Similar advice could be gathered many places in the late Renaissance rhetorical tradition that together with natural law was Holberg's intellectual background. But he was very insistent on this point and seems to have had absolutely no sympathy with the antiquarian tradition with its critical acumen, love of details and all-embracing interests. Last but not least, he did not share the antiquarian's obsession with ancient history and origins. In an oft-quoted passage he stated rather uncharitably: 'to study northern antiquities is only to rummage in dung heaps'.<sup>35</sup> A look at the dimensions of his *History of Denmark* will serve to elucidate the point:

- Volume one (856 pages) covers 111 BC to 1513 AD, all in all 1624 years.
- Volume two (922 pages) covers 1513–1648, a total of 135 years.
- Volume three (722 pages) covers 1648–70, only 22 years.

It is not unfair to say that Holberg's *History of Denmark* is lopsided and that 'modern' history, especially the genesis of Danish absolutism, dominates. This is partly due to his reliance on narrative sources and earlier historians but also mirrors a conscious choice. Modern historians see their task essentially as an independent construction or reconstruction of past reality on the basis of all available source material, especially documents. Pre-modern, pragmatic historians such as Holberg saw their task as the digestion and reformulation of existing narratives occasionally supplemented with, or underscored by, printed and manuscript documents. Holberg repeatedly complained about the dearth of 'materials' and by this he meant chronicles, journals and memoirs. This goes some way to explain the uneven chronological distribution but the organization of the *History of Denmark* also mirrors Holberg's persuasion that modern history was so much more interesting and useful to the reader than ancient and medieval history.

### **Impartiality?**

According to Holberg the good historian must possess good judgement and be impartial. He dwelled at length on the last point and he praised the



French historian Jacques Auguste de Thou (1553–1617), author of a history of his own times (the French religious wars), because you could not from his *Memoirs* see to what nation or religion he belonged.<sup>36</sup> In his *History of Denmark* and *General Church History* Holberg repeatedly protested his own impartiality or criticized others for being partial. Among those regularly singled out for censure was the great German natural lawyer and historian, Samuel Pufendorf (1632–94), who had written a general Swedish history and detailed accounts of the Swedish warrior kings Gustavus Adolphus (ruled 1611–32) and Charles X Gustavus (ruled 1654–60). This placed Holberg in a quandary for as a foreigner Pufendorf would seem to have a much better claim to the impartiality Holberg himself aspired to. Holberg solved the problem by turning it into a case of managing the passions:

... a foreigner [cannot] make the same of history as a native, because the latter's reigning fear and passion may, albeit with difficulty, be overcome, while the former harbours an ignorance that cannot quickly be surmounted.<sup>37</sup>

How did Holberg measure up to his own standards? On the one hand, as detailed above, it is clear that Holberg broke with the traditional national enthusiasm for the martial exploits of the ancient Danes. He not only cut down the description of heroic prehistory but showed distaste for the Viking raids on England in the eleventh century which he thought 'no less useless than unpleasant to relate'.<sup>38</sup> It is also evident that he did not suppress uncomfortable facts from recent history. When dealing with the sensitive topic of the introduction of absolutism in 1660, he included information on conspiracy and campaigning that equated badly with the official version of the events.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand he used narrative and discursive elements to underscore a version of Danish history that was not chauvinistic but nevertheless loyal to the national and political (absolutist) sentiments of his day. After all he claimed: 'I say nothing without evidence and also stick to the well known axiom that every honest man is obliged to defend the government he lives under'. The author of 'the well known axiom' is by the way the before mentioned Pufendorf whom Holberg repeatedly criticised for being partial!<sup>40</sup>

A short study of Holberg's treatment of the controversial figure of king Christian II (ruled 1513–23) will illustrate the point. Christian II had many traits in common with Henry VIII. He was strong, ambitious and paid absolutely no regard to traditional social and religious values. In November 1520, after having conquered Sweden and granted amnesty to all who had opposed him, he was solemnly crowned hereditary king of Sweden. At the end of three days of celebration he staged a show trial of heresy and hastily slaughtered more than fifty of his political opponents, including two bishops and several nobles. This rightly infamous 'Stockholm Bloodbath' triggered rebellion in Sweden and eventually also in Denmark. The king fled the realm



in 1523, attempted a comeback in 1531 with the help of his brother-in-law, emperor Charles V, but failed, was captured and spent the rest of his life (until 1559) in custody. In Danish as well as in Swedish historiography Christian II had traditionally been depicted as the archetypical tyrant whose character was fatally flawed and whose every act was a stepping stone to the final downfall.

Not so with Holberg, whose line of defence could be labelled 'containment' rather than rehabilitation. He dismantled the traditional holistic view of Christian II by establishing a rupture between his policy up till the Swedish campaign in 1520 and the subsequent events. Even though he diagnosed a royal master plan to rule unconstrained (absolutely), to control the nobility and the church and to become master of Sweden, he defended the means chosen by the king during the first seven years of his reign because they were rational and necessary or at least excusable. Then came the Swedish campaign followed by irrational acts, such as the sudden return to Denmark between the conquest and the coronation in Stockholm with the subsequent bloodbath, or the king's passivity during the following year when the Swedish revolt gathered momentum. In these and other cases, Holberg admitted that the king acted 'against sound government maxims' but instead of condemning his cruelty he called the acts 'incomprehensible' and 'strange'.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore Holberg dismantled the connection between bad morals and bad politics that lay at the centre of the traditional view of Christian II as a tyrant. According to Holberg, Christian 'was driven to this act [Stockholm Bloodbath] more by a wrong policy than by natural bloodthirst'.<sup>42</sup>

Holberg also began his 'Impartial judgement on the Stockholm Bloodbath' with the statement that 'the deed was unchristian and highly reprehensible, so that no honest man or good Christian can or should defend it', but the net result of his analysis is that Christian II was definitely no 'Nordic Nero' and that the Stockholm Bloodbath was not the unmasking of a tyrant but a tragic and ultimately inexplicable political error committed by a great ruler in a very difficult situation.<sup>43</sup> Repeatedly Holberg praised the commercial and social policies of Christian II and mentioned that the king was loved by the populace and hated by the great, and he underlined that even if Christian II had done very wicked things his history would have looked different if it had been written by a burger such as the Mayor of Malmö and not by the Chancellor of the Realm (Huitfeldt), let alone a Swede.<sup>44</sup> At a later point he even observed how unfair it was that the (mad) king Eric XIV of Sweden (ruled 1560–8, deposed) was much less criticised than Christian II, because Eric XIV 'exceeded him [Christian II] by far in evil but in no way resembled him in good'.<sup>45</sup> In this way Christian II was not exactly whitewashed but nevertheless transformed from the black sheep in the glorious line of Oldenburg kings to a tragic figure and a protagonist of some of the most progressive features of the absolute monarchy of Holberg's own day.



## The Pufendorf trail

As mentioned above, de Thou was Holberg's professed ideal of an historian because of his impartiality and the broad range of useful subjects he included in his narrative. This is somewhat incongruent because de Thou wrote the history of his own times while Holberg deliberately ended his history fourteen years before he himself was born. Another French author, Gabriel Daniel, is also praised but for two achievements he shared with Holberg; his diligent search for authentic *mémoires* and his clear understanding of the condition of his home country. However, the author who in outlook and methodology most resembled Holberg was the above-mentioned Samuel Pufendorf whom Holberg damned with faint praise, sometimes directly vilified and often studiously chose not to mention, especially where he followed him closely. It is difficult to interpret this as anything but Holberg's deliberate attempt to downplay his debt to Pufendorf. Nevertheless, the imprint of Pufendorf is strong in all phases of Holberg's historical writing.

It begins with Holberg's first published work, the *Introduction to the History of the most Prominent European States* (1711) which is very much an adapted and updated version of Pufendorf's successful textbook, *Einleitung zu der Historie der Vornehmsten Reiche und Staaten so itziger Zeit in Europa sich befinden* (*An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States now existing in Europe*), which was published 1682 and appeared in numerous editions, translations and adaptations.<sup>46</sup> Even if Holberg relied heavily on Pufendorf – to say that he plagiarized him would be both exaggerated and ahistorical – he entirely left out Pufendorf's trenchant introduction which explained the use of historical knowledge for rulers and their advisors. According to Pufendorf, history provided the basis for a clear understanding of each individual state's 'interest'. In this connection it was vital to distinguish between 'imagined and real interest'. Imagined interests were those that could be pursued only at the cost of antagonizing several other powers and upsetting the entire balance of power. Real interest on the other hand was twofold, perpetual and temporary. The perpetual interest derived from the geopolitical situation, the constitution and the natural character of the people, while the temporary interest was defined by the opportunities and risks created by ever changing power politics. To know the interest of all the European states and especially of one's neighbours was the duty of every prince, and if he was not capable of that his advisors ought to know, for example by reading Pufendorf.<sup>47</sup> In keeping with this theory of interest Pufendorf ended every chapter of *Einleitung* with an analysis of the state interest of the country in question.

All this, the theory, the concept and the sections on each state's interest, Holberg left out of his own European history, whether for political reasons or from lack of space is unclear. Two years later, when he published the *Supplement to the Historical Introduction* (1713), the first and only of five planned volumes, he briefly referred to Pufendorf's treatment of state



interests and included corresponding paragraphs on state interest in the *Supplement's* description of Germany, England and the Netherlands. From then onwards it is fair to say that Holberg's historical writings were based on a Pufendorfan vision of politics. He did not employ the exact terms of imagined and real interest, but he regularly used the concepts of 'interest' and 'state error', of which the first corresponds to Pufendorf's real interest and the second is a functional paraphrase of imagined interest. Even if Holberg eschewed Pufendorf's metaphysics it is also fair to say that he subscribed to Pufendorf's concept of the state as an artificial person, or player as one would probably say today.<sup>48</sup>

Holberg's most Pufendorfan work of history is his *General Church History* which by and large is modelled on the famed chapter 12 of Pufendorf's *Einleitung* that deals with the history of the papacy and the relations between church and state. This is especially patent in his treatment of key points in church-state relations, such as the accession of Constantine and the Reformation and in his implacable stance towards the Papacy and the Catholic church.<sup>49</sup> However, in the more than 1,000 pages of the *General Church History* Pufendorf is mentioned only once on a minor point in a footnote.<sup>50</sup>

This strong Pufendorfan stamp on Holberg's historical oeuvre need not surprise us even if Holberg chose not to advertise it. As already mentioned, his first historical work, the *Introduction to the History of the most Prominent European States*, was modelled on Pufendorf as was his textbook on the *Law of Nature and Nations* (1716), which is quite openly and heavily dependent on Pufendorf's two works on natural law (see chapter 3).

Holberg's dependency on Pufendorf might also go some way to explain why he chose to end his *History of Denmark* with the death of Frederick III in 1670 rather than with the death of the successor Christian V in 1699, as originally planned. Ostensibly he chose to end in 1670 because he did not want to write 'gazettes', but if we take seriously Holberg's closeness to Pufendorf's mind set another explanation seems at least possible.<sup>51</sup> If Holberg had covered also the reign of Christian V (1670–99) he would have been forced to deliver a Pufendorfan evaluation of the rather energetic but futile foreign policy of the good-natured but not too clever Christian V. This verdict would have had to be rather damning and in conflict with his overall plot (cf. below). Maybe this is one good reason why Holberg stopped at 1670. The other good reason being that his original scheme had slipped, the planned two volumes had already grown to three, and maybe he was daunted by the prospects of producing yet another tome.

## Grand narrative

This brings us to the question of the grand narrative of Holberg's histories and whether such a master plot exists. Without doubt the ideological contents and the narrative form in Holberg's historical works are not as fully



integrated as for example in David Hume's masterful *The History of England* (1754).<sup>52</sup> Holberg utilizes the much simpler device of straightforward narrative combined with regular assessments or considerations of the main events and characters. These remarks in general follow a moderately patriotic and royalist line but occasionally assume the form of rather strained political correctness. The above mentioned 'impartial remarks' on Christian II and the Stockholm Bloodbath is one example. Another would be the concluding remarks on the introduction of absolutism, where Holberg explains that quite contrary to the evidence produced on the preceding pages the nobility was not forced to accept absolutism but freely assented to the proposal of the burgers and the clergy. The reason for this somewhat surprising conclusion is that the nobility was divided, some were for absolutism, others were against. Only the latter group – whose size is not specified but Holberg lets the reader gather that it was small – was coerced but in any event not by the king but by the dire necessity of the realm!<sup>53</sup> In these remarks Holberg showed himself as the loyal citizen of his native country and its absolutist regime and it would be anachronistic to call him a hypocrite for that reason (cf. Pufendo's axiom above).<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a pervasive master narrative more or less clearly articulated in all his historical works. This grand narrative is the emergence of the modern dynastic and absolutist state of which the Kingdoms of Denmark and Norway are a prime example. This state was characterized by military strength, internal security, political stability, administrative efficiency, mercantilist policy and meritocracy in the shape of career opportunities for the sons of the middle class. It was a secular state in the sense – and only in the sense – that the church had no political power and was controlled by the king. The enemies of this good political order were the nobility and the (Catholic) church who at different times, but most notably during the Middle Ages, had exploited moments of weakness to limit royal power. According to Holberg, royal authority had originally been strong and hereditary but due to weak rulers, the malice of the clergy and political vicissitudes a limited, elective monarchy had gradually been established at the end of the Middle Ages. With the accession of Christian I in 1449 the glorious line of Oldenburg kings had begun. Their virtue had not been able fully to compensate for the constitutional shortcomings of the age and hence they were not responsible for the disastrous series of wars 1625–9, 1643–5 and 1657–60. Nevertheless, the virtue of Frederick III had saved the country during the Swedish Wars 1657–60 and he was but duly rewarded when absolutism was introduced in 1660. This coup d'état, which Holberg in accordance with the official ideology saw as the restoration of royal authority, came in the nick of time and ushered in a golden age of hereditary absolutism.

This grand narrative of decline, fall and eventual restoration of royal authority with all its concomitant blessings of good governance, military strength and flourishing commerce is most unequivocally expressed in the



*Description of Denmark and Norway* (1729) but also underlies the *History of Denmark*, while his *General Church History*, which stops short at the Reformation, tells the corresponding history of decline, fall and incipient restoration of secular power on a European scale (see chapter 9).

### Holbert as an historian among historians

According to Holberg himself, the *History of Denmark* had been a great success and met with universal approval of his choice of style as well as of contents, the only critic being disqualified by being both a publisher and a Swede.<sup>55</sup> In fact not everybody was equally enthusiastic. The most thorough assessment was formulated by his colleague at the University of Copenhagen, Hans Gram (1685–1748), professor of Greek, royal librarian and keeper of the public records. Gram was everything that Holberg was not; a great classical scholar, an antiquarian with a pure love of detail and a helpful and sociable fellow. Holberg had only scorn for the erudition of Gram but Gram at least tried to be fair. When the German professor Christian Gottlieb Buder (1693–1763) of Jena asked Gram to give an overview of Danish and Norwegian historical literature for inclusion in his new edition of an international historical bibliography, the *Bibliotheca Historica Selecta* (two volumes, Jena 1740), Gram wrote twenty folio pages, including detailed assessments of Holberg's *History of Denmark* and the *Description of Denmark and Norway*. Buder published a condensed and partly inaccurate version of the text without reference to Gram but luckily, Gram's manuscript has been preserved and so the full extent of his opinion of Holberg.<sup>56</sup>

Gram praised Holberg's style and composition as much superior to his predecessor Huitfeldt's ten-volume history of Denmark from 1595–1604. Furthermore, he commended Holberg's diligence in finding and exploiting manuscripts, especially dealing with Christian IV (ruled 1588–1648) and Frederick III (ruled 1648–70). Their history he had 'told in a manner which maybe no other of our compatriots would have dared, including many anecdotes and secrets from the manuscripts'. On the other hand, Gram blamed Holberg for the precipitous composition which had led to errors, omissions, repetitions and misjudgements. Gram did not like Holberg's exaggerated criticism of Huitfeldt, nor his bold judgements and conjectures, and he called attention to his tendency to the humorous, the satirical and the colloquial. Indeed, according to Gram Holberg's taste for trifling subject matter often made him forget appropriate historical gravity.

This diagnosis of Holberg's weak points has been verified by modern research. He worked fast and did not like double-checking. When composing the *History of Denmark*, he recycled substantial parts of his *Description of Denmark and Norway* verbatim, and when, twenty years later, he prepared a second edition of the *History*, he made only a few corrections and did not at all take account of the rich historical literature published during



the intervening years. When at all possible Holberg composed his narrative on the basis of a limited number of printed and manuscript chronicles and memoirs that he abridged and rearranged to suit his own agenda and supplemented with bits of documentary material taken from funeral sermons, a collection of royal letters and a volume of printed ordinances. He tried to use narrative sources contemporary with the events he dealt with but he had no clear sense of the value of documents and nourished a somewhat naive confidence in the golden mean as an efficient shortcut to truth in the face of conflicting evidence.

This is not to say that Holberg was uncritical. His broad reading allowed him to correct many errors in previous histories and he used both common sense and a robust understanding of the power of vested interest as his guiding lights. On the other hand, he was not above dressing himself in borrowed plumes. Even if he cited many sources in the footnotes, he often omitted those he relied most heavily on, and occasionally lifted whole passages with scholarly discussion, quotations and references directly from unidentified printed works.<sup>57</sup> However, his scholarly shortcomings should not be overemphasised. Part of Gram's objections simply mirror the fact that he was a cautious antiquarian while Holberg was a true pragmatic historian for whom history had to be coherent, instructive and entertaining as well as true.

For the following generations until the middle of the nineteenth century Gram's mixed but fundamentally positive verdict was echoed by Danish and German historians who repeatedly criticized Holberg's haste and lack of precision, especially in the first volume of the *History of Denmark*, but praised the style and the contents of the second and third volumes. Apart from the inherent qualities of Holberg's work, a contributing factor to his lasting fame was the fact that the next general histories of Denmark of comparative scope and readability were published only a century later, with G.L. Baden's *Danmarks Riges Historie* (*History of Denmark*, 1829–32) and C.F. Allen's *Haandbog i Fædrelandets Historie* (*Textbook in the History of the Fatherland*, 1840).

When in the second half of the nineteenth century the advent of historicism and positivism fundamentally changed the face of Danish historical scholarship, it also changed the evaluation of Holberg. New ideals of historical criticism and a growing disenchantment with the tradition of rhetoric and moral philosophy that informed Holberg's outlook made his historical works seem not only outdated but fundamentally unscholarly. While Gram was accorded a place of honour on the high road leading to modern historical scholarship, Holberg was placed on an honourable side track leading nowhere. This position was first articulated clearly by the great historicist and Ranke-pupil Caspar Paludan-Müller (1805–82) in a lecture in 1874 (published 1883).<sup>58</sup> Other historians of a more positivist bend, first and foremost the Norwegian liberal professor Ernst Sars (1835–1917), asserted the opposite position. Sars claimed that Holberg had really been a positivist



*avant la lettre* who years before Voltaire had understood and practiced the core principles of modern science, namely the idea of progress and the concept of historical laws (what Karl Popper called ‘historicism’).<sup>59</sup> In different proportions both positions have dominated subsequent scholarship but the first position is one-sided, the other untenable.<sup>60</sup> Both try to measure Holberg with their own scholarly yardstick but only end up demonstrating the partial incommensurability of historical paradigms. In step with the decline of historicism and positivism but also due to what is often referred to as the linguistic or cultural turn in historical scholarship, a better understanding of Holberg’s historical oeuvre including his concern with style and moral philosophy seems underway.<sup>61</sup> It appears, in short, that we can again begin to appreciate him as the pragmatic historian he was.

## Conclusion

As mentioned above, Holberg was no royal historiographer and even if he was staunchly loyal to the ruling Oldenburg dynasty and the absolutist regime he was no mere panegyrist either. There is every good reason to take seriously his repeated protestations that his aim was to serve the reading public and remedy the lack of ‘necessary publications’. To understand what he meant by this we need to remember that Holberg was also a moralist. All his works were edifying in some sense or other in addition, of course, to being entertaining and enlightening. The deep message of Holberg’s historical work was twofold. It contained an explanation of how the present political, social, commercial and religious order had come into being and it resonated with the reassurance that this order was very close to ideal and that the present political leadership in the shape of the hereditary Oldenburg kings did an excellent job. All dissimilarities untold, one can say that Holberg’s *History of Denmark* shared the deep political loyalty and national pride with Voltaire’s *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* and the presentist and edifying agenda with David Hume’s *The History of England*.

## Notes

- 1 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3 (Copenhagen: 1735), b2 v.
- 2 Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker. En historiografisk-kritisk undersøgelse* (Copenhagen: 2015).
- 3 Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, *Historiography at the Court of Christian IV (1588–1648). Studies in the Latin Histories of Denmark by Johannes Pontanus and Johannes Meursius* (Copenhagen: 2002).
- 4 Orest Ranum, *Artisans of Glory. Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth-Century France* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1980).
- 5 Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker*, 15–26.
- 6 George H. Nadel, ‘Philosophy of history before historicism’, *History and Theory*, 3 (1964) 291–315.
- 7 Anthony Grafton, *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: 2007).



- 8 Cf. J. H. Zedler, *Großes vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, 68 vols. (Halle, Leipzig: 1731–54), 13 (1735), 284 (s.v. 'Historie').
- 9 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3, c1 r.
- 10 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3, c1 r.
- 11 Torben Damsholt, 'Den nationale magtstat 1560–1760', in Søren Mørch, ed., *Danmarks historie. Bind 10. Historiens historie* (Copenhagen: 1992) 53–104; Sune Berthelsen, 'Holbergs historiske syntese', in *Holberg i Norden. Om Ludvig Holbergs författerskap och dess kulturhistoriska betydelse*, ed. Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Christensen Teilmann and Frode Thorsen (Göteborg: 2004) 78–105.
- 12 *Dannemarks og Norges Beskrivelse*, 334–335, 552 (quotation); cf. *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 919,
- 13 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 528. Cf. chapter 5, this volume. Other strong women in *Dannemarks Riges Historie*: Thyra Danebod (vol.1, 89); Queen Philippa (vol. 1, 563); Mother Sigbrit (vol. 2, 8, 31, 115–116), Leonora Christine (vol. 3, 592–593).
- 14 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 534.
- 15 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 873–876, vol.3, 96–130, 161–166, 698–700, quotation 699.
- 16 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3, b1 v.
- 17 Gabriel Daniel, *Histoire de France depuis l'Etablissement de la Monarchie Françoisse dans les Gaules*, 3 vols. (Paris: 1713), vol. 1, *Préface* (unpaged). In the revised edition (Paris: 1722) the words are on lxx.
- 18 Ellen Jørgensen, 'Hans Grams Vurdering af Holbergs historiske Arbejder', in *Holberg Aarbog* (1924): 137–141; *Danske Samlinger*, 1. rk., I (1865–66): 400; *Danske Magazin*, 6. rk., V (1930): 246; Carl Christoffer Gjörwell, *Bref Om Blandade Ämnen* (Stockholm: 1754) 41–43, 80–81.
- 19 Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: 1974), 40–56 (on Gibbon).
- 20 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 1. Cf. Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Den største Zirat udi Fædernelandets historie? – om folkevandringerne i Pontanus' og Holbergs danmarkshistorier', in *Hvad tales her om? 46 artikler om græsk-romersk kultur. Festskrift til Johnny Christensen i anledning af hans afsked som professor ved Københavns Universitet*, ed. Mette Sophie Christensen et al. (Copenhagen: 1996) 389–399.
- 21 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 12.
- 22 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 36.
- 23 Compare *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 643, footnote (a), 747; vol. 3, 618; *Epistel* 177, 334 (with the same example and metaphor as in *History of Denmark*); 'Fortale' in Peder von Haven, *Reise udi Rusland* (Copenhagen:1743),
- 24 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 182. Cf. also *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1 193, 315, 465, footnote (n), 612, 782–783; vol. 2, 8, 24–26, 884–896; vol. 3, 56–80; *Adskillige store Heltes og berømmelige Mænds, sær Orientalske og Indianske sammenlignede Historier og Bedrifter efter Plutarchi Maade*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: 1739), I, 101.
- 25 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 453. In Holberg's counting Valdemar IV is Valdemar III.
- 26 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3, 420; cf. *Dannemarks og Norges Beskrivelse*, 402. Cf. chapter 6 for Holberg's use of 'fifth monarchy' in *Niels Klim*, and *Epistle* 357 for his awareness of the Fifth Monarchy movement in the English Interregnum.
- 27 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 187.
- 28 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 211–212. The exaggerated number of killed priests was corrected in later editions.
- 29 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 202.
- 30 E.g. *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 91–94, 208, 212, 220–221, 289, 291, 295, 326, 335, 363, 485–487, 661.



- 31 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie* (Copenhagen: 1738), c1 v.–c2 r. Cf. chapter 9.
- 32 *Dannemarks og Norges Beskrivelse*, 552; cf. *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 634.
- 33 E.g. *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 22, 35, 42, 58, 72, 93, 116, 137, 170, 179, 223, 241, 244, 296, 333, 346, 379, 395, 419, 447, 456, 460, 463–464, 476, 509, 606, 612, 686, 787–788, 809, 816; vol.3, 16, 98, 147, 184, 186, 217, 220, 226, 236, 250, 262, 272, 336, 341, 346, 372, 374, 380, 387, 390, 399, 404, 420, 432, 438, 465, 524, 541, 595, 604–605, 610, 614, 632–634, 670, 682, 684, 691, 695.
- 34 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 656.
- 35 *Moralske Tanker*, 525, cf. also 533.
- 36 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3, a1v.
- 37 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3, a2r.
- 38 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 123.
- 39 Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, “Saa at jeg har efterlevet en Historieskrivers uden at overtræde en Borgers Pligt” – naturet og historie i Holbergs behandling af enevældens indførelse 1660’, in *Ludvig Holbergs naturrett*, ed. Eiliv Vinje and Jørgen Magnus Sejersted (Bergen: 2012) 118–139.
- 40 *Dannemarks og Norges Beskrivelse*, 60; cf. Samuel Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man, According to the Law of Nature*, trans. Andrew Tooke (1691), ed. Ian Hunter and David Saunders (Indianapolis, IN: 2003) 248 (book 2, ch. 18).
- 41 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 67, 71, 74, 94.
- 42 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 78.
- 43 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 78.
- 44 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 130.
- 45 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 2, 477.
- 46 Samuel Pufendorf, *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe*, ed. Michael Seidler (Indianapolis, IN: 2013), with a very useful introduction and appendices.
- 47 Pufendorf, *An Introduction*, 7–8.
- 48 Cf. Chapter 3.
- 49 Compare *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: 1738), vol. 1, 179–180 (Constantine), vol. 2, 987–991 (Luther), vol. 2, 1003, 1009–1011, 1013–1014 (modern clergy and Papacy) and Pufendorf, *An Introduction*, 422–423, 432–435 (Constantine), 467–469 (Luther), 476–477, 479, 514, 523, 488, 493 (modern clergy and Papacy). Cf. chapter 9.
- 50 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, vol. 2, 1010.
- 51 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 1, 37; vol. 3, c1 v.
- 52 David Hume, *The History of England*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, IN: 1983) which is based on the 1778-edition. Cf. also David Hume, *The History of Great Britain*, ed. Duncan Forbes (London: 1970), which reproduces the text of the first edition of the first published volume (James I and Charles I) with a valuable introduction.
- 53 *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, vol. 3, 481.
- 54 *Dannemarks og Norges Beskrivelse* (Copenhagen: 1729) 61. Cf. Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man*, 248.
- 55 *Epistler*, vol. 5, 16 (*Epistel* 447).
- 56 Burckhard Gotthelf Struve, *Bibliotheca Historica Selecta in suas classes distributa*, 2. ed., ed. Christian Gottlieb Buder, 2 vols. (Jena: 1740) 1556–1595, the passage on Holberg at 1550. The manuscript was first edited by Ellen Jørgensen: ‘Hans Grams Vurdering af Holbergs historiske Arbejder’, *Holberg Aarbog* (1924): 137–141; cf. also Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker*, 27–31.
- 57 The most blatant example is the greater part of chapter 12 on legal history in *Dannemarks og Norges Beskrivelse* (pages 647–666), which is a direct crib from Chr. Stub, *Dissertatio Historico-Juridico, De Lege & Legislatoribus Danorum*, I–IV (Copenhagen: 1716–18). Cf. also chapters 5 and 10.



- 58 C. Paludan-Müller, 'Dansk Historiografi i det 18de Aarhundrede', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 5. rk., IV (1883–84): 1–188, especially 35–55, 77.
- 59 Ernst Sars, 'R. Nielsen: Om Holbergs Kirkehistorie og Theologi' [1867] and 'Foredrag ved Universitetets Holbergfest den 3die December 1884', both reprinted in Ernst Sars, *Samlede Værker*, 4 vols. (Kristiania: 1911–13), vol. 4 (1912), 24–48.
- 60 Francis Bull, *Ludvig Holberg som historiker* (Kristiania: 1913); Sigurd Høst, *Om Holbergs historiske skrifter* (Bergen: 1913); Damsholt, 'Den nationale magtstat 1560–1760'; Berthelsen, 'Holbergs historiske syntese'.
- 61 Cf. *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg*, ed. Jørgen Sejersted and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen (Oslo: 2014); Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker*.



## 9 *General Church History*

*Rolv Nøtvik Jakobsen*

Ludvig Holberg's *General Church History* was published in 1738, three years after the completion of his *History of Denmark*, and it marks his return to the writing of general histories for the educated reader.<sup>1</sup> The work sold well and was republished in 1740 and 1765 and appeared in German translation with a continuation by a German minister (1749 and 1762–77 respectively) but it has received scant attention in later scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The two volumes and 1,000 quarto pages of Holberg's treatise deal with the history of the church from Jesus Christ up to the Reformation. In an interesting preface, the only part of the work that seems to have been widely read, Holberg presents the aims and methodology of the work and situates it in its historical context and as part of his published oeuvre. The present chapter will offer a brief outline of the *General Church History* and discuss its structure, narrative strategy and ideology, as well as attempt to situate the work in the context of European historiography and intellectual history with special attention to the relations between church and state.

### **The preface**

In the preface Holberg points out that in spite of the overwhelming number of works on the history of the church available, there was a scarcity of such works in Danish. Because of this, ordinary Danes had virtually no knowledge of church history. Some authors had tried to present all available facts regarding the history of the church in isolation from secular history, resulting in boring presentations that had given the genre a bad reputation. Holberg's aim was a church history that was a good read as well as instructive. This way of popularizing the subject for a broad Danish audience was an integral part of Holberg's publication programme, known from his textbook on natural law and his historical-topographical works. In order to make church history relevant and interesting for a general readership, Holberg underscores the interaction between politics and religion, state and church. Secular and religious history were inseparable: 'whoever has not read both of them, has read nothing. The most important revolutions in the state have arisen from religious conflicts, and many important measures have been



undertaken under the pretext of religion'.<sup>3</sup> This intertwining of secular and religious elements, Holberg points out, is exactly what makes the work as useful for a theologian as for a servant of the state (a 'Politicus').<sup>4</sup> It is, of course, not surprising that knowledge of church history is useful for a theologian. It is less obvious, at least to the modern reader, that such knowledge is as useful for administrators and policy-makers, but this statement gives us a lead.

In the preface, Holberg explains the title of the work in the following way. It is a *general* (*Almindelig*) history because it ends before the different denominations and national churches became institutions in their own right. It is a *history* (*Historie*)<sup>5</sup> with an engaging story and vividly depicted characters, not an annalistic listing of dates and names. As always, Holberg underlines his ambition to be impartial and he refers to the famous work of the German radical Pietist Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714), *Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-historie*, published 1699–1700. However, Holberg is no follower of Arnold. He comments that Arnold's work, the first detailed general history of the church in German,<sup>6</sup> did not fulfil the promise of its title: 'As many people who want to reform things, the author has slipped from one extreme to another, more dangerous one'.<sup>7</sup> Instead of eulogizing church fathers and damning heretics, Arnold, in Holberg's opinion, had done exactly the opposite. He had painted the church fathers in the darkest colours and elevated the heretics to saintly status, and he had done so – a qualification no less damning in Holberg's mind – 'in a way more fitting a sermon than a history'. For his own part, Holberg intends to follow 'the middle way' by 'placing a Roman Catholic author on one side of my desk and a Gottfried Arnold on the other'.<sup>8</sup> But Holberg also notes that even with great caution it is almost impossible to be wholly impartial on this subject; in most cases it is possible to decide from the writing alone what country and denomination the author belongs to. A truly impartial church history will therefore still be reckoned '*inter pia desideria*', among the (unfulfilled) pious wishes.<sup>9</sup>

As with his other general histories, Holberg does not claim that the *Church History* is an 'authentic' or original work, for it is mainly based on secondary rather than primary sources, and it is brief for its subject. In order to make the book enjoyable, Holberg intends to focus on conflicts and declares that he has, as in his other writings, adjusted his way of writing to the matter he is treating.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Holberg presents himself as an author who is able to wear or take off his serious mask, depending on the subject matter. The church, in its first three centuries, had been characterized by sound teaching and Christian virtues, and this according to Holberg demands a sober and serious style. During the Middle Ages, however, the church declined in life as well as in teaching, and the appropriate way to deal with this is through satire. Furthermore, Holberg contends that this method of adjusting the writing style to different subjects and contexts is the reason why he has written and published in a plurality of genres, both serious and comic.



## A golden age

The first chapters of the *General Church History* – those dealing with the history of Jesus Christ and his early followers – represent a challenge to any modern reader whose knowledge of Holberg is primarily based on the reading of some of his comedies. This is especially the case if this reader has been taught that Holberg was an adherent of a ‘radical Enlightenment’ critical of religion and miracles. As Holberg underlined in his preface, these first chapters are written in a serious style befitting the subject. The portrait of Jesus and the first disciples is based on the gospels and there is little critical distance in the narration of the acts and teachings of the first Christians. Holberg portrays Jesus mainly as a moral teacher who made use of parables and stories in order to ‘moralize’ most effectively, but it is abundantly clear that Holberg sees his teaching confirmed by miracles and that he believes that Christ’s death and resurrection are the confirmation and fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. In other words, Holberg’s Jesus is also the Messiah, and the Sermon on the Mount is ‘the core of everything in Holy Scripture’.<sup>11</sup> The miracles of Jesus get a large amount of attention and the resurrection and ascension are presented as credible historical facts. The differences between the gospels’ accounts only serve to demonstrate that they are based on the reports of independent eyewitnesses and thus ‘rather contribute to strengthen than to weaken their stories’.<sup>12</sup> The teachings of Jesus were, in Holberg’s view, simple, readily understandable and practical. Jesus treated everybody in the same way and in words and deeds he taught the virtues of ‘meekness, charity and compassion’ and, most of all, criticized the vice of hypocrisy.<sup>13</sup> Simplicity of faith and probity of living are the key concepts and Holberg sums up the Christianity of the apostolic age in this way: ‘There were no formal confessions of faith. To become a member of the congregation it sufficed to express belief in Christ and to prove one’s faith by humility, charity, meekness and Christian virtues’.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis was more on right living than on doctrine: ‘The first Christian teachers endeavoured to follow in the footsteps of Christ in life and deed rather than to dispute’.<sup>15</sup> Heretics were those who led bad lives but they were not punished, only shunned by the faithful.

The presentation of a golden age of the church where the Christians in spite of their differences regarding dogmatic questions and culture lived together peacefully and also respected the secular authorities, established a measure with which to evaluate its subsequent history. If we believe Holberg, the miracles performed by Jesus and his first followers dealt with real problems such as death and illness and did not consist of magical tricks or foolish ‘miracles’ as in the later history of the church. The first Christian congregations functioned well without bishops or any centralized authority. The acts of charity were held in higher regard than dogmatic opinions. In order to belong to the church, it was enough to agree in a minimalistic confession of Jesus as Son of God and to live an orderly life. Enthusiastic behaviour



and mystics separating themselves from the community of believers were not well regarded in this period. In this way the reader was informed of Holberg's view of the following events in the history of the church and was also given some clues regarding his view of the contemporary religious landscape.

In the years following this golden age, the church began to set up a power base of its own and the bishops started to act as secular rulers. This introduced tensions in the relationship to the secular authorities of the Roman Empire and led to internal schisms and endless disputes over dogmatic issues. Faced with this situation Constantine's foundation of a state church was in Holberg's view legitimate and necessary. It was however not implemented in a way that set an end to this internal strife in the church. The following story of the church, as Holberg tells it, is therefore a history of decay, at least up to the Reformation when Constantine's good intentions were finally carried out with more rigour and consequence.

## Two plots

Like most of its predecessors the *General Church History* presents its material strictly in chronological order. Each chapter deals with a new century. However, this structure does not function especially well. As Holberg's narration concentrates on conflicts, both between the secular and religious leaders and between groups in the church itself, the accounts of centuries without pressing conflicts are short. While the chapter on the fourth century consists of more than 110 pages describing great changes in the power balance between the Emperor and the church, as well as theological conflict around the great ecumenical councils, the chapter on the tenth century is only twenty-three pages long. This century was of little importance in the history of the church, 'because there was no heresy to fight'.<sup>16</sup> The book's focus on conflict leaves the author little scope to elaborate on intellectual church history, institutional history or new forms of religious practice. The scholastic philosophers for instance are described in a few sentences and Holberg concludes that their writings and polemics were based on irrelevant subtleties that even they themselves did not understand.<sup>17</sup> The life of Saint Francis of Assisi is covered in just a few words.<sup>18</sup> Holberg ends with the Reformation, for thereafter there can no longer be a 'general history'. The existence of many independent churches, each with its own laws and constitutions demands individual stories about the church in Denmark, England, Holland and so on.

According to Holberg, the Lutheran Reformation marks a new start after nearly fifteen centuries of continuous decline. Holberg shared this basic storyline with all Protestant church history, e.g. the famous Magdeburg Centurators (Matthias Flacius and consorts). Nevertheless, Holberg's vision was especially sombre which in some ways brought him close to Arnold. However, for Arnold the merciless decline of the church started already in



the second century, whereas Holberg operates with a golden age of three centuries with the years around 400 as the turning point. Where the community in Arnold's eyes is the source of corruption and true Christianity only to be found among individual Christians, Holberg for his part harboured a deep mistrust against groups and individuals who separated themselves from the community. But on one point Holberg followed in the footsteps of Arnold and even borrowed a central concept from him. That was the concept of the hereticator ('Ketzer-Macher') who in his exaggerated defence of orthodoxy declares others to be heretics and himself falls into the opposite extreme which calls new narrow-minded orthodox hereticators on the scene and so forth. By means of this negative dialectic the hereticator necessarily creates even graver heresies, pushes the church even farther from the 'apostolic simplicity' of the first centuries and ends up as an intolerant, merciless, unchristian persecutor. For example, Holberg shows how in the fifth century the theologian Evtyches in his polemic against Nestorius went from one extreme to another, concluding that 'excessive vehemence against heresy often breeds even more dangerous heresy than the one originally challenged'.<sup>19</sup> The criticism of investing too heavily in the subtleties of metaphysics to support dogmatics is a theme which permeates other parts of Holberg's oeuvre; we recognize it early in his depiction of academic disputations in *Peder Paars*, in comedies such as *Erasmus Montanus* and in the stories of Martinia and Potu in *Niels Klim*, published three years after the *Church History*.

According to Arnold the process of decay was not reversed at the Reformation and the dynamics of heretication continued with poor pietists and dissenters as the victims of orthodox Lutheran theologians' vilifications. We will never learn exactly what Holberg thought of that, but it is reasonable to assume that one of the reasons he stopped his account with Luther was that it excused him from pronouncing an explicit verdict on this point. Elsewhere in his works he left no doubt about his negative view of the more extreme forms of pietism.

This process of negative dialectics based on internal church polemics was in Holberg's eyes *nearly* unstoppable exactly because it was internal; it was not possible to stop such an ongoing process from a position inside the church, e.g. through a general council. As the process of deterioration resulted from a conflict over power, the only way to end it was to recognize the legitimacy of secular rule also over church life. On this point Holberg differed from Arnold who distrusted every institution and power structure – inside or outside the church. Therefore, Constantine in Arnold's eyes was a villain while in Holberg's opinion he is a true hero who brings right order to the relations between church and state by subordinating the church to the secular but Christian authorities. Constantine's assumption of power was thus a legitimate action to set things right in a situation where different factions in the church were fighting each other by all means to achieve power. In the new historical situation, where the secular ruler was a Christian, to



regard the Emperor as the ultimate head of the church was, in fact, Holberg argues, clearly in line with natural law.<sup>20</sup> Sadly Constantine's exaggerated respect for the bishops and his status as a new Christian prevented him from doing the job properly and therefore was only able temporarily to reverse the process of decay. This part of Holberg's narrative which clashed directly with Arnold is based on the well-known chapter 12 of Samuel Pufendorf's *Einleitung* (1682), which Holberg followed closely.<sup>21</sup>

The *Church History* goes on to show how the Roman Catholic Church gradually established itself as a power in its own right, with its own laws and institutions, just like any secular state. The relationship between secular and religious rulers necessarily evolved into sharp conflicts, and this is an important part of the plot in the second part of the work, succeeding to the hereticator-plot of the first part. Holberg hardly writes as an impartial historian in these chapters. If we are to believe Holberg, most of the popes and other church leaders were obsessed with worldly power. In some cases, the kings were excessively peace loving and pious, while the religious leaders without exception were more ruthless than their secular counterparts. Both parties refused to act according to their supposed roles, and Holberg inevitably saw this as the stuff that comedies are made of, satirizing both kings and popes. However, the outcome of the conflict between the church and the secular authorities was by no means to be seen as a joke, for the church became an influential political institution in all parts of Europe and eventually based its authority on a forgery, namely the canon law.<sup>22</sup> Later in the work Holberg underlines that the version of canon law authorized by Pope Clemens was 'a copy of . . . the religious laws of the rabbis'.<sup>23</sup> Holberg thus makes it clear that canon law is both illegitimate and closely connected to a model of power that Jesus had rejected.

Recognizing two plots which successively dominate the *General Church History*, the negative dialectics of dogmatism on a horizontal axis, and the political struggle for authority between the pope and secular rulers on a vertical axis, helps to explain why the description of the High Middle Ages turns out to be rather short and anaemic in comparison to the first part of the book. At the time when the political struggle for authority had been resolved in a lasting *modus vivendi*, the central authority of the church was able to set an end to internal theological and political dissent. Without materials to feed the two master plots, *General Church History* offers some anecdotes about kings and popes but does not deal at any length with other issues of importance in the period, such as innovations in church architecture, art, music, liturgy and, especially, in theology and learning. The establishment of universities is scarcely mentioned and the important theological and philosophical debates related to the rise of scholasticism, are simply dismissed in a few sentences.

The events leading up to the Reformation give new life and importance to both of Holberg's master plots and the final chapters of the work offer a vivid description of a theologically based intervention with church authority



which turned out to have huge political consequences. Martin Luther plays an important role in the last part of Holberg's narrative with its emphasis on Luther's heroic struggle against the hegemonic power of the pope, burning of the canon law and condemnation of the indulgence trade as crucial for the Reformation of the church. Both as a politician and a human being, Luther differed from Holberg's own ideal of impartiality and temperance in the search for a *via media* between extremes. In spite of this, Holberg concludes that the work of Reformation could not have succeeded with a more phlegmatic and detached leader, such as Luther's companion Melanchthon. In an interesting comment, Holberg compares Luther with Emperor Constantine who also succeeded in introducing important changes in the relationship between church and state, despite (or because of?) the fact that, as Holberg underscores, the Emperor hardly was an ideal human being. Holberg does recognize the importance of material and cultural developments, such as print technology, alphabetization and the dissemination of the Bible, for the emergence of the Reformation. But in the end it is Luther's individual and heroic efforts that he highlights.

### The theatre of the church

Holberg's experience as a playwright and historian was deployed to create a both coherent and entertaining narrative of the church up to the Reformation. In telling this story he made use of metaphors and concepts from theatre life. The reader is told that most heretics, from Arius to Muhammad, used masks and played 'roles' to hide their own identity. In the case of the heretic Muhammad, he played his role so well that he even fooled his family to believe he was a prophet. Only after a while did he let his mask fall and showed himself as the shrewd politician he really was. It is striking that Holberg, who later wrote important Plutarchian biographies of heroes, did not portray many real heroes in the history of the church. St. Augustine was too quarrelsome, and St. Francis was certainly no hero for he lived his life in such a way that 'no cynic philosopher ever has played such a strange role'.<sup>24</sup> With the exception of Jesus and the first Christians, and in his own way Luther, most of the actors who played a role in the evolution of church history were neither villains nor heroes. They were rather ordinary people caught up in the internal dynamics of the history of the church, the negative dogmatic dialectics inside the church and the power struggle between the church and secular rulers. Holberg characterises some of the events, especially in the later centuries, as 'the sad tragedies, played with emperors and other kings, who tried to defend the majesty of civil government'.<sup>25</sup> Holberg's portrait of Emperor Julian the Apostate, 'a very theatrical person', shows the ambiguity of his historical role by telling two alternative versions of his last words. The death scene of Julian is staged as ambiguously as those in the finale of Henrik Ibsen's *Brand* and *Ghosts*. Despite the tragedies in the middle part, the overall plot of Holberg's treatise is comic. The happy



circumstances of the golden age is, in some way, restored in the finale of the *General Church History*, the Reformation. In fact, Vilhelm Andersen, one of the few literary historians who have commented on the work, compared its overall plot with the comedy *Erasmus Montanus*.<sup>26</sup> Holberg's interest in the theatricality of life is also reflected in some scattered remarks on plays performed in the churches,<sup>27</sup> most clearly in the last chapter on the events leading up to the Reformation. In some detail Holberg presents the 'well known ingenious comedy' performed for the Emperor Charles V in 1530, where actors portrayed such important agents as Erasmus, Luther, Pope Leo X and the Emperor himself. Holberg offers more space on this theatrical representation of the historical situation than on the crucial political events in the Diet of Augsburg the same year.<sup>28</sup>

### **The *General Church History* in its Danish context**

The *General Church History* was published at the height of the reign of King Christian VI (1730–46). The king's public support for the sort of Pietism known from Halle had the previous year resulted in the publication of an official catechism, written by the court preacher Erik Pontoppidan, a work heavily influenced by the catechism of Philipp Jakob Spener. The catechism was to be used in preparation for confirmation, an act that in itself was necessary for obtaining the rights of a citizen in the Kingdom. The King was able to decide which interpretation of the Lutheran confession should be followed in both state and church and was regarded as the final authority in all matters of importance to the life of the church. This was due to two important events in the history of the country. First, as part of the Reformation in 1536/37 the king was given, or took, ownership of the buildings and other property that had belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and by his authority regulated all aspects of religious life. The Lutheran superintendents, who had some of the functions of the former Catholic bishops, were appointed by the King and were servants of the state. Secondly, when the king became an absolute monarch in 1660, the representatives of the nobility lost all formal influence on affairs of state, including matters of the church. In the (written) absolutist constitution, the *Royal Law* of 1665, the king is unequivocally set above the clergy with authority to regulate church affairs.

Holberg strongly supported the Danish state church but was very critical of Pietism. As a doctrine of extremism it was a serious moral failure in the eyes of a *via media* moralist like Holberg. The pietists made people depressed and seditious and caused unnecessary schisms. How much he disliked Pietism only became clear after the accession of the neither pious nor energetic Frederick V in 1746. But published as it was at the height of the Pietist furore in the country, it is difficult not to read the *General Church History* as a warning directed to Christian VI and his councillors not to follow fanatical priests and latter day hereticators. He does not say it in so



many words but he probably thought that the pietists were nearly as bad as the papists. At the same time, Holberg did not hold those at the other extreme in high regard, the Orthodox Lutherans who still held sway in the church establishment. In Holberg's opinion these theologians were always on the look-out for heresies in their own church and in other protestant denominations. Their insistence on orthodox doctrine and authoritarian handling of dogmatic differences was likely to create heretics and lead to further internal schisms and unnecessary conflicts in the church.

The church was an important part of the administration of the kingdom and a large number of laws regulated its internal life. For Holberg, Christianity, especially in its Lutheran form, was of crucial value for both the state and society because it underscored the importance of the subjects' loyalty towards the king and was a guarantee of political stability. Religious strife and conflicts had, as the church history showed, caused instability, political discontent and even wars. A sound Lutheran Christianity was therefore an important part of the social bond. By presenting arguments which made it possible for servants of the state to understand and legitimize the present state of affairs, a work of church history could rightly be regarded as useful – especially if it instructed readers how to handle the practical challenges as well as shed light on the fundamental problems regarding the relationship between church and state. By publishing *General Church History* Holberg intended to do both.

Caution is nevertheless needed in attempting to reconstruct Holberg's views on church politics and the ideal relationship between state and church from the *General Church History*. Some of the arguments are underplayed and more hinted at than stated. Moreover, as the work ends with the Reformation, it does not directly give a clear view of the author's opinion on the Danish and Norwegian Lutheran church. However, in some instances the authorial voice is clear in showing the contemporary lesson of the narrated events, and by comparing such passages with Holberg's comments in other works it is possible to reconstruct a coherent picture of his views on central religious and political matters. This is particularly the case with his assessment of the relationship between the major denominations and of the role of toleration. For example, he portrays the Donatists as a dangerously schismatic and unruly sect, even though they did not differ from the rest of the church in its dogmatic opinions. From which he draws the general lesson that, 'simple separatists are often worse and more dangerous people than those who really propagate false teaching', a finely double-edged sword against the insistence on doctrine by the orthodox and against the social misbehaviour of pietists.<sup>29</sup> Basing his analysis on the before mentioned chapter 12 of Pufendorf's *Einleitung*, Holberg considered the modern Roman Catholic Church externally nearly invincible and internally unreformable.<sup>30</sup> It was vain to expect that the leading Catholic power, France, could or would follow the example of England and create a hierarchical episcopal church independent of the Papacy. In France the political and ecclesiastical



hierarchies were too intertwined and dependent upon Rome. Only a meeting of all the estates would have the power to effect a reformation, and it was not likely that the absolute monarch was inclined to issue such a call. A reformation decree by the king was even less of a possibility, for he would not be able to muster either the domestic or international (Catholic) authority to do so. Under these circumstances it was clearly not prudent among Protestants to 'criticize those who advise Protestants to unite their strength through lasting alliances and pacts against such a terrifying, common enemy'.<sup>31</sup> In other words he underlined the need for a common Protestant front against the continuing Catholic menace. It would not be too hard to translate those considerations to Danish circumstances for either the King or those who wanted a pietist 'reformation' of the Danish and Norwegian Church and who might be too sensitive about whom they wanted to have as their allies against the common enemy.

The last point is directly relevant to the issue of toleration, which Holberg addresses both in the *Church History* and in the *Epistles*. In Epistle 37, for instance, Holberg argues against a politics of toleration that includes Catholics.<sup>32</sup> This is in line with the anti-Catholic arguments of a broad spectrum of Protestant thinkers, including Locke and, more relevantly, Holberg's early model, Pufendorf. It is also in conformity with the views of the Danish-Norwegian King. Toleration among Protestants, meaning first of all Lutherans and Calvinists, would be politically useful, as he argues in Epistle 78 on the basis of materials from church history. However, church history also shows that toleration is entirely unlikely to create a unified Protestant front, nearly as unlikely as the many ideas of unity in a latitudinarian church with a minimalist communion.<sup>33</sup> Both in Holberg's *Church History* and in his other works the reader is inevitably left with the impression of a dangerous world in which a territorially anchored church subject to the absolute power of the king was the best bet for safety. Holberg belonged firmly in the Erastian tradition, in which the state or the king was to rule the church. In this he was entirely in line with both Pufendorf and Thomasius and miles apart from Locke, who would base toleration on an objectionable theory of natural rights.<sup>34</sup>

### Holberg and the historiography of church histories

Holberg wanted the *General Church History* to be useful to servants of the state. This aim, although important, was not the only motivation for writing such a book. The author also intended to make an important part of European intellectual heritage, namely church historiography, available to the ordinary Danish reader. This effort was an integral part of Holberg's politics of language, aiming to make the Danish language suitable for reflection, intellectual exchange and scholarly work.

It was a substantial tradition upon which Holberg drew. The fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, author of a *Church History* (c. 324),



is commonly regarded as the father of church history, and his work functioned as the starting point and paradigm of most subsequent classical and medieval church history. Despite the pioneering works of Eusebius, church history as a genre and as an important part of the theological curriculum emerged only in the sixteenth century. This was due to two closely related factors, the spread of printing technology which proved a strong stimulus to all historical writing and the events of the Reformation which turned church history into a confessional battleground. The classic *Ecclesiastica historia secundum singulas centurias* (often referred to as the *Magdeburg Centuries*), published 1559–74 by Matthias Flacius Illyricus and his collaborators, was a huge work written by scholars advocating Lutheran orthodoxy. The title refers to the way it presented the history of the Church century by century in an annalistic manner. The *Annales ecclesiastici a Christo nato ad annum 1198* (1588–1607), by the Italian cardinal Baronius, was structured in the same way as the *Magdeburg Centuries* and intended as a rebuttal from a Roman Catholic perspective. In fact, most histories of the church written up to the eighteenth century were marked by a clear confessional tendency, be it Lutheran, Catholic or Reformed. In the preface to his *Church History*, Holberg names several of the most important modern treatises which he has made use of in addition to Arnold. The most important of these is the voluminous *Histoire ecclésiastique* (1691), by the French historian Claude Fleury (1640–1723). In addition, Holberg mentions the works of the French church historian Louis Ellies Dupin (1657–1719), the Anglican orientalist Humphrey Prideaux (1648–1724), the French Reformed theologians Jacques Basnage (1653–1723) and Jacques Lenfant (1661–1728). Some other authors whom we know Holberg had read are, oddly, referred to neither in the preface nor in the work itself. The most prominent of these are Samuel Pufendorf (mentioned only once in a footnote on a minor point) and Christian Thomasius. Of those two, Pufendorf had a great impact on Holberg in history and natural law, and it is clear that the Danish author's understanding of the church and its position in the state was in complete accord with Pufendorf. How much this meant for Holberg's writing of church history is an open question as is the importance of Thomasius, to whom Holberg had an ambivalent attitude.<sup>35</sup>

The works Holberg did refer to represented a variety of both geographic origins and denominations. We have to bear in mind that differences between authors formally belonging to the same denominations often could be as marked as those with members of other churches. The Lutheran hyper-orthodoxy of the Croatian Matthias Flacius, the author of the first part of the *Magdeburg Centuries*, was far from the standpoints of the German radical Pietist Arnold. While Baronius was a cardinal, the Catholic author Dupin was accused of both Gallicanism and Jansenism. Dupin was in fact an important illustration of Holberg's point that when an author managed to publish a critical account of his own church, then this was important evidence of veracity.<sup>36</sup> For Holberg this broad spectrum of conflicting



approaches within and between Catholic and Protestant church history suggested an opportunity to write an impartial treatise or rather to pick and choose according to his own preferences.

The concept of impartiality central to the tradition of church historical writing was a slippery one. Arnold, who highlighted the concept in the title of his work, meant a position of not belonging to any dominant party, or denomination. Thomasius likewise declared his work impartial but meant a vantage point above the conflicting parties. As we have seen, Holberg made use of the *via media* as a preferred method to secure impartiality; by choosing a standpoint right in the middle of opposed views, Holberg thought himself able to be impartial in writing history. The ideal of *via media* is in Holberg's works closely connected to his preference for eclecticism (cf. the Introduction and chapter 4) and to his pragmatic ideal of writing history (cf. chapter 8). This ideal is also found in the seminal church history of Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, *Institutiones historiae ecclesiasticae*, published in 1755, that is only seventeen years after Holberg's *General Church History*.<sup>37</sup> Mosheim's work was, however, intended to be 'unparteilich' in the scholarly sense of 'objectively true'. It was based on primary sources to an extent which was not possible for Arnold and not intended by Holberg. Mosheim's *Institutiones* was addressed to a European scholarly republic consisting of different linguistic and ecclesiastical constituencies and was soon translated into both English and German. The English translation, *An Ecclesiastical History, Antient and Modern, from the Birth of Christ to the Beginning of the Present Century* (1765), served as a common textbook and underscored that the work set a new standard for church historians. Mosheim paved the way for church history to be considered a scholarly discipline integral to academic study. Consequently, works in the field became specialized, written to address other academics rather than to enlighten a broader public, as Holberg explicitly set out to do. This fundamental historiographical shift, whereby the ideal went from being 'readable' and 'useful' for a broader public to being 'critical' or 'scholarly' in a way approved by other specialists, goes a long way to explain the sharp decline in the fortune of Holberg's work after his own time.

## Holberg and religion

Surprisingly few writers have used *General Church History* in order to characterize Holberg's own position in religious and theological matters. This holds true even for the couple of monographs dedicated to Holberg and religion in which Holberg is simply a staunch critic of the Roman Catholic church.<sup>38</sup> This is undoubtedly true, but as we have seen, the *Church History* was in fact a much more constructive contribution. It suggested the state-supporting role of an established church in a strongly Erastian arrangement; it showed the danger of schismatic and extreme forms of religion and underlined the overriding value of a practical, non-dogmatic



Christianity as a basic moral code; by tracing the corruption of the universal church, it more than implied the fundamental value of the Lutheran Reformation and the safety of the territorialized churches, especially in their alliance with strong central governments that might venture to mint moderate religion into some limited and *ad hoc* state protected toleration. The *Church History* confirms what we see elsewhere in Holberg's work, namely that he had no time for extremes, whether radical or orthodox, and to suspect deism, let alone atheism, is fantasy (cf. chapter 4). Last but not least, the *Church History* was yet another effort to use the vernacular to display European learning and to do so in the form of some dramatic stories.

## Notes

- 1 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie fra Christendommens første Begyndelse til Lutheri Reformation*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: 1738).
- 2 *Allgemeine Kirchenhistorie vom ersten Anfang des Christentums bis auf die Reformation Lutheri*, trans. G. A. Detharding, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, Leipzig: 1749); this edition was re-issued as vols. 1–2 of a six-volume set, of which vols. 3–6 provided a continuation by J. L. Köhler, first from the Reformation until the eighteenth century (vols. 3–4), then from 1700 to 1750 (vols. 5–6).
- 3 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, Preface a2v.
- 4 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, Preface a2v.
- 5 The Danish 'historie' covers both 'history' and 'story.'
- 6 Johannes Wallmann: *Der Pietismus* (Göttingen: 2005), 156–160.
- 7 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, Preface a3r.
- 8 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, Preface a3v.
- 9 Possibly a pun on the title of the Pietist classic, Philipp Jakob Spener's *Pia desideria* (1675).
- 10 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, Preface c1v.
- 11 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 14. Holberg had used a similar turn of phrase on one version of the title page of the first edition of *Law of Nature*: the core of morality. Cf. chapter 3, 76.
- 12 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 32.
- 13 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 20.
- 14 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 101.
- 15 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 101.
- 16 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 514.
- 17 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 778.
- 18 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 695.
- 19 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 328.
- 20 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 179.
- 21 This is shown in chapter 8 (see note 49 for the detailed references).
- 22 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 630–631.
- 23 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 806.
- 24 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 323.
- 25 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, c3v.
- 26 Vilhelm Andersen: *Illustreret dansk Literaturhistorie* vol. 2 (Copenhagen: 1934), 119–120.
- 27 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 262, 898.
- 28 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 1007.



- 29 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 182.
- 30 See above at note 19.
- 31 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 1016.
- 32 See Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, 'Den anti-katolske Holberg. Kirke, stat og naturret i skyggen af Samuel Pufendorf', *Historisk Tidsskrift* 117 (2017) (forthcoming).
- 33 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, 1013.
- 34 Cf. chapter 3, 71–74.
- 35 Concerning history, see chapter 8, 174. Concerning natural law, see chapter 3, esp. 69–71 regarding Thomasius.
- 36 Cf. *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, preface, a3v.
- 37 Roland M. Lehmann, *Die Transformation des Kirchenbegriffs in der Frühaufklärung* (Tübingen: 2013), 243–339; U. J. Schneider, 'Zum Sektenproblem der Kirchengeschichte', in *Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693–1755). Theologie im Spannungsfeld von Philosophie, Philologie und Geschichte*, ed. M. Mulsow et al. (Wiesbaden: 1997), 147–191.
- 38 Ludvig Selmer, *Ludvig Holberg og religionen* (Kristiania: 1914); Søren Holm: *Holberg og religionen* (Copenhagen: 1954).



## 10 *Jewish History*

*Jørgen Magnus Sejersted*

At a relatively late stage in his career Holberg published a *Jewish History*<sup>1</sup> of 1,458 pages in two volumes in Danish. The timeline of this work stretches from Creation to the situation of Jews in Europe in the author's own time and Holberg claimed that this complete chronology made it the first of its kind. It is divided into fifteen books on periods defined by major historical events. The first volume starts with different opinions on the creation of the world and ends with the Maccabees. The second begins with the sovereign regents of the Hasmonean house and culminates in the description of the present situation of the Jews in different parts of the world and the reflections of the author. *Jewish History* mirrors the intellectual debate of the early eighteenth century as it combines both sacred and modern, universal and national, history with Bible criticism and discussions of miracles and prophecies within a providential narrative. It was quickly translated into German,<sup>2</sup> but there is little evidence that the work had any widespread influence as it was soon regarded as one of several Christian histories of the Jews that did not meet later requirements of critical historical research. A typical commentator from the late eighteenth century dismisses it along with a string of related works: 'A considerable number of general books on the history of the Jews, both manuals and large works, by Lange, Budde, Prideaux, Calmet, Holberg, Bastholm, Berruyer, Mahy, Maizonnet, are all lacking in critical value'.<sup>3</sup> This genre might be a dead end in the development of historical writing, but it is highly receptive of the tensions of early Enlightenment.

*Jewish History* has been viewed as something of an anomaly in Holberg's authorship and has received scant attention from scholars because it was hastily compiled from different sources.<sup>4</sup> Holberg's personal friend, the German composer J.A. Scheibe, however, defended the work and suggested that Holberg conceived the idea already during his stay in Oxford 1706–8 and collected relevant material during his travels in Europe,<sup>5</sup> in which case it would be the result of more than thirty years of preparation. Whatever the background for *Jewish History*, the method of compilation and commentary is typical of the period and occurs in several of Holberg's prose works, such as the *History of European States*, the *Law of Nature*, parts



of the *History of Denmark* and the *General Church History*, to which *Jewish History* is closely connected.<sup>6</sup> When the compiling is as conspicuous as in *Jewish History*, a reading has to consider the use of sources – not in order to reduce the role of the compiler, but to acquire a notion of how he consciously deviates and develops personal style and overarching narrative, taking into account the specific audience to be cultivated. This chapter offers an overall impression of the work as well as some examples of how Holberg constructs an authorial self as an intellectual protestant in dialogue with contemporary European debate.

Holberg was no Hebraist and his work does not seem to supersede his immediate sources in any aspect of orientalist knowledge. When occasionally he comments on the Jews elsewhere in his authorship, his general attitude is pragmatic, fairly tolerant and shows an interest in criticising common prejudice.<sup>7</sup>

*Jewish History* does not have a specific Danish perspective, and the Jewish situation would hardly have immediate relevance for the Danish audience, although a few local historical circumstances may play an implicit part in Holberg's considerations. The Danish-Norwegian laws on Jews traditionally made an important distinction between common Jews, who could only enter the kingdom with individual permission, and 'Portuguese' (Sephardic) Jews, who in some documents were generally tolerated.<sup>8</sup> This had caused considerable confusion both in local courts and in everyday life, as Holberg himself had hinted at in the comedy *11. June*.<sup>9</sup> Holberg clarifies the distinction in *Jewish History*,<sup>10</sup> although he also rather aggressively dismisses the idea of a royal ancestry of the Sephardic Jews and criticizes their ambition.<sup>11</sup> A more significant local circumstance might be that in 1728 the government under influence from pietism had attempted a conversion of Jews ordering their compulsory attendance at special public sermons in Copenhagen, which apparently led to an increase in public abuse of the Jewish community. At one sermon attendance is reported to have been sixty to eighty Jewish men, which probably implies that women and children were exempted.<sup>12</sup> Holberg in his work repeatedly emphasizes the negative aspects of forced conversion, which might be relevant to his contemporaries as part of his criticism of the influence of pietism on politics. It has been emphasized that 'enlightened despotism' in the eighteenth century needed to clarify the legal situation of the Jews as an anomaly within the modern states,<sup>13</sup> and to some extent Holberg's book could be helpful in this context, but this in no way suffices to explain the effort put into this work.

## Defence of providence

The explicit overall framework for *Jewish History* is the question of providence. There has been some discussion among Holberg scholars as to whether he was a concealed radical who only made concessions to theological revelation and political absolutism for career reasons. While some



of his other work might give room for such interpretations, *Jewish History* demonstrates how he deliberately chooses providence and Biblical authority in the face of intellectual uncertainty and radical provocation. In the introduction he states clearly that the cultural survival of the Jews is proof of providence. The history of the Jews, he says:

[. . .] reflects the utmost prosperity, the utmost misery, obedience and disobedience, fear of God and ungodliness and the wonderful economy of God, of his love, patience, omnipotence, wisdom and at last strict justice. Most of its history is not only miraculous, but even written by miraculous writers, so it is fair to say, that it is written by the finger of God. The laws, customs and ceremonies of the people have been dictated by God himself and its government has been unequalled in history. In short: This people has been singled out from all other nations.<sup>14</sup>

This argument is reflected throughout the book, in one place closely following Basnage concerning the providential aspect of the dispersion of the Jews,<sup>15</sup> and it is reiterated at the end of the work:

To see a scattered and humiliated people that has been pursued by sword and fire yet still counts several millions who have preserved their old tongue, laws, mores, religion and ceremonies, is a paradox that cannot be comprehended and a knot that cannot be untied by human reason or historical examples, so there is no way around acknowledging the finger of God.<sup>16</sup>

In this way, Holberg holds on not only to the general providence manifest in the laws of nature, but to an extraordinary providence, the active force of God in the world, demonstrated by the survival of the Jews. Parallel with *Jewish History* he wrote Latin epigrams on sacred history, several of which display an element of paradox and humour that demonstrate an intellectual distance to the Biblical text intended for an academic audience.<sup>17</sup> The moral lesson of providence is also the main point of his final, forty-six-line epigram titled 'Abstract of Jewish History'. Here Holberg first observes the unique Jewish history: 'No nation has had such a lot and such a long history,/ None has been more wise, none more foolish. / None more happy and none more lamentable,/ None more lowly, none more noble'.<sup>18</sup> The purpose of this history is to be a theological example: 'It gives an example of divine justice as well as of divine love,/ It can be observed in God's supreme wrath as well as in his grace'. The divine inspiration behind the biblical texts is asserted: 'The people's writers are poets and prophets,/ they write down what has happened and tell what will happen./ They are knowledgeable about the past as well as the future,/ They only write down wonders and what is full of miracles'. The only specific historical circumstances mentioned are the crucifixion, civil wars and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem leading to



the catastrophic dispersion which serves as a moral lesson to the world: 'This people does not die, but remains forever dying. / Learn, o mortals! how inevitable is the punishment of Heaven'.

This conservative, providential framework is part of Holberg's reaction to radical ideas, although the specific interpretations of the historical circumstances that dominate the 1,500 pages of *Jewish History* also offer some resistance to such theological reduction. The deist John Toland, to whom Holberg would refer in his later essays, had stated in the aftermath of Jacques Basnage's tolerant popularization of Jewish history, *The History of the Jews from Jesus Christ to the Present Time* published in French in 1706, that the survival of the Jews as a distinct nation in spite of centuries of persecution, contempt and hatred, could only be explained by '[. . .] either the constitution of the Government, which anybody that says so ought to show; or a particular providence, which must be likewise prov'd; or a concurrence of both of these, where the distinction shou'd be very clear'. The clarification of this would be of interest to all parties: '[. . .] the Jews, the Christians and the Deists, are equally interested to clear this matter'.<sup>19</sup> The deist tradition in the wake of Toland generally uses Jewish history to criticize miracles and prophecies along with the idea of the Jews as God's chosen people.<sup>20</sup> Holberg's text counters this radicalism and emphasizes that the answer is providence; the finger of God is the immediate reason Jewish culture survived. However, throughout the work he also elaborates on the 'concurrence' between the specific circumstances, which is 'the constitution of Government', and divine interference in such a way that this is kept in precarious balance. The oracle of the Jews, according to Holberg, lost its divine power shortly after the Babylonian captivity, after which time Jewish legislators had no direct access to God's advice, but God still intervenes through historical circumstances, particular persons and, of course, through the miracles of Jesus. However, providence does not make historical causation irrelevant, and Holberg remains interested in the laws and customs of the Jews. He also uses Jewish history to reiterate some of his favourite maxims, such as the ability of the strong leader to shape the characteristics of his people through 'good laws and examples', which is the basic axiom stated at the beginning of the second volume as the essence of the previous volume.<sup>21</sup> Holberg is after all a historian whose absolutist principles evidently inform his interests in the dynamics of history throughout the work.

General accounts of the Enlightenment era often imply that radicalism and tolerance are tightly connected in a paradigm of modernity. This connection is not obvious when it comes to attitudes towards Jewish culture. Many have emphasized how the deists of Holberg's time by reducing Christianity to a core that was implied by creation as such, also reduced the Jews to a 'mere remnant of ancient barbaric tribes, living on in the midst of civilized Europeans, preserving bizarre fanatical customs'.<sup>22</sup> Holberg's text exemplifies how a certain degree of tolerance stems from biblical traditionalism rather than radicalism. In holding on to the Jewish cultural survival



as a miraculous sign of providence, Holberg legitimizes Jewish culture in a European context, albeit as an example of God's strict punishment – but also mercy. In the European context of 1742 this might have seemed belated compared to some of the radical intellectuals to whom he refers, but to a broader Danish audience the many references to radical Bible criticism would probably be more intriguing than the well-known assertion of providence.

### Method of compilation

As an historian, Holberg tends to rely heavily on a few, dominating works from which he compiles and summarizes. Often, even the references are copied directly from the main source, the outline of which he regularly follows page by page. However, he also frequently adds comments, inserts some original references, criticizes his source or makes significant deviations. He inevitably also adds some personal style and wit when translating and re-writing, but it is clear that even to his contemporaries, his writings sometimes challenge the line between acceptable imitation and plagiarism that is negotiated in early eighteenth-century criticism.<sup>23</sup>

In the 'Translator's Preface' in the German edition of *Jewish History* from 1747, the translator Detharding, a friend of Holberg's, seems somewhat hesitant concerning the originality of the work, but emphasizes how Holberg administers his sources as a dialogue in which the characteristic wit of the author shines through:

The Baron Holberg never ignores a circumstance or place in Scripture that have occasioned different interpretations or considerations without commenting on this and adding his own opinions to those of other scholars, which he demonstrates so convincingly by important reasons or highly probable conjectures, that you cannot but concur with him. [...] to which the author sprinkles a great many pertinent comments, which makes his work all the more beloved and useful. All the benefits of the Holbergian writings are to be found in abundance also here.<sup>24</sup>

Although the authorial remarks referred to here by no means dominate the text, it is these frequent shifts from compiler to commentator that give the text a Holbergian quality.

In the foreword, Holberg mentions four main sources. These are the anonymous first volume of *A Universal History, from the Earliest Account of Time*,<sup>25</sup> the Romano-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (AD 37–100),<sup>26</sup> the English clergyman Humphrey Prideaux (1648–1724)<sup>27</sup> and the French protestant historian Jacques Basnage (1653–1723).<sup>28</sup> All but the first had also featured in Holberg's *General Church History* (1738), to which *Jewish History* is tightly connected. He mentions several other Christian and Jewish scholars, emphasizing Jean Le Clerc and Hugo Grotius, two of his favourite authorities throughout the authorship,<sup>29</sup> and the German Johann



Jakob Schudt, whose work on Jewish culture is today infamous for its cultural prejudices. These additional sources are used by Holberg for smaller corrections and comments. It has not yet been established which editions of these works Holberg used, and the present discussion is based upon English versions available in Holberg's time, since this suffices to show how he not only follows the general argument, but often translates specific sentences and paragraphs.

The basic structure of Holberg's compilation is as follows. The first 300 pages that lead from Creation to the first Jewish king Saul, are based on *An Universal History*. The following 140 pages describing the Jewish kings follow mainly Josephus and The Old Testament, but this is where Holberg seems most independent. Holberg taps into Humphrey Prideaux when he comes to the demise of the Jewish kings with Ahas, who receives the prophecy of Messiah but turns away from God.<sup>30</sup> The next 450 pages, containing a description of the last Jewish kings, the diaspora in Babylon and forward to the birth of Christ as well as a reflection on Jewish sects, are compiled from Prideaux. Approximately 570 pages based predominantly on Basnage cover the time from the death of Herod the Great to the current situation of Jews in different European states,<sup>31</sup> including a general discussion of Jewish culture and religion.

This compilation is made into a coherent historical narrative from divine creation to modern times and presented in Holberg's fluent style. The transitions between sources are not apparent in Holberg's text, which to the unsuspecting reader flows relatively smoothly. Occasionally Holberg merges his sources, as when a chapter on different tribes of Canaan, compiled from *An Universal History*, is placed within the section dominated by Prideaux. In this particular case Holberg's aim is to point out that all the other tribes descending from Abraham's immigration to Canaan are long extinguished, in contrast to the miraculous survival of the Jews. In the transition from Prideaux to Basnage, Holberg deviates from both sources with a paraphrase of the life of Christ that disturbs the historical discourse with popular evangelizing. Herod the Great and the Jewish sects are treated by Prideaux as well as Basnage, and in both cases Holberg follows mainly Prideaux as the most recent, but maybe also the most relevant. Importantly, he explicitly dismisses Basnage's argument that Herod was only a Roman vassal, thereby strengthening the idea of an independent Jewish rule over Palestine and supporting not only Prideaux, but also indirectly rabbinic history.<sup>32</sup>

The quantity of Holberg's text is only a fraction of his sources, so one of his main contributions is to choose omissions and make abbreviations. But he is also deviating, adjusting and adding to the text on themes of particular importance. Typical of Holberg's style are small portraits of famous men such as Abraham, Saul and David, and also concluding moral deliberations upon some issue or previous commentator. These traits are well known from Holberg's other 'pragmatic' historical writings,<sup>33</sup> and sometimes distinguish him from his sources, which he also on occasion criticises openly. He uses few footnotes and



prefers to present different opinions and conflicting theories in the main text, thus rendering his book a coherent, but slightly dialogical, or even ironic, style throughout. The unity of the work is emphasized through cross-references, but he cannot escape some structural inconsistencies, as when Jewish culture and religion in the first volume follows *A Universal History* but in the second the perspective of Basnage.<sup>34</sup> The main question, however, must be how Holberg aligns not only his style, but his intellectual agenda with that of his different sources.

### **Sale and Psalmanazar: authorship and Old Testament controversies**

Holberg's first source, the early volume of *An Universal History, from the Earliest Account of Time, to the Present*, is itself a conundrum as to authorial presence. It was a monumental undertaking that had started in the 1720s and in the end would run to sixty-five volumes as it reached its own day in 1768 as 'the most widely circulated subscriber-supported publication in the eighteenth century with the sole exception of the *Encyclopédie*'.<sup>35</sup> The first edition presents itself as 'Compiled from original Authors' without naming the actual compilers. The work has been described as a product of poor, 'intellectual mercenaries' associated with the 'Grub street writers', which nevertheless influenced famous authors such as Gibbon, Jefferson and Mill, who used it as a source, with or without reference.<sup>36</sup> It seems to have been intended for such use as Holberg's; a text that depersonalizes original authors into an objective universality in order for new authors to repersonalize the facts by adding some of their own wit and style. These compiling anonymous intellects did, however, themselves have identities, style and agendas. It seems to be in recognition of this that their names are added in later editions. The first part, which is relevant to Holberg, is predominantly written by the intriguing pair of George Sale and George Psalmanazar.

The orientalist George Sale (1697–1736) is known as the first significant English translator of the Quran. He was probably responsible for the first part of *An Universal History*, from the Creation, Adam and Eve, the deluge and to the time of Abraham, which is to say the truly universal part of human history. Sale had been instrumental in planning the whole work,<sup>37</sup> but he was considered somewhat of an unreliable freethinker and according to his successor Psalmanazar, he 'had no great regard for the Old Testament'. Psalmanazar, on the other hand, when revising the universal part and writing the Jewish history from Abraham to Saul, saw it as his obligation to 'vindicate both his [Moses'] character and writings' and 'acknowledge the divine authority of the Old Testament'.<sup>38</sup> He thought Sale's text too radical for the market and thought his own conservative approach more commercially viable. Hence there is already a hidden controversy between strong minded authors, one radical and one conservative, within the text Holberg uses.<sup>39</sup>



There is a further, unexpected twist to this story of authorial identity. Psalmanazar had a record as a famous impostor causing considerable scandal in England at the time Holberg lived in Oxford (1706–8). Psalmanazar had come to England claiming to be a native of Formosa (Taiwan). He had even published *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa* in 1704, a book still remembered today for the fake Formosan language it described in great detail. An allusion to this scandal is found in Holberg's comedy *Mascarade* (1724) where the Danish servant, disguised as a Rabbi, utters the word 'Psalmanasar' as part of a pretended foreign language. Invented, or personal, languages remain a recurrent theme in Holberg's fiction. Despite being gradually found out as an impostor, Psalmanazar had pursued Hebrew studies and managed to make a modest career for himself as a scholar and a writer in London, being entrusted with the universal history project when Sale died. As the writers' names did not feature in the first edition, it is uncertain whether Holberg, as he was compiling his *Jewish History*, was aware that he was copying first the freethinking translator of the Quran and then the person whom he had known by reputation as a notorious impostor, whose translated sentences and paragraphs he now published in his own name.

Holberg's opening discussion of Creation compares the book of Moses with quite detailed accounts of physico-theological writers such as William Whiston and Thomas Burnet. Holberg emerges as well educated in these matters, but a brief comparison with Sale's<sup>40</sup> detailed account of the same authors makes it unlikely Holberg ever held the works of Whiston or Burnet in his hands. It is all from Sale, and Holberg also adopts much of Sale's attitude of a somewhat distant interest in the speculative theories of physico-theology.

There is however a difference in attitude towards scripture. Sale introduces Moses thus:

And now we come to the only authentic and genuine history of the creation, which has been left us by Moses and carries with it all the marks of truth and probability, even though it be regarded only as a humane composition and separate from divine authority: And it is to this purpose. – In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.<sup>41</sup>

When Holberg introduces Moses, both similarities and differences are apparent:

I will not speak of the many opinions and mere guess-work of others concerning the creation of both Earth and man. That would be too long-winded both to recite and to refute and I will therefore immediately get to Moses' story, which in brief is this: In the beginning God created heaven and earth.<sup>42</sup>

Both accept Moses' account as more immediate and authentic than the ideas of modern thinkers, but Sale has done what Holberg does not bother to do.



More importantly, Holberg does not underline that the Books of Moses are a human composition separate from divine authority. To Sale the historical contextualisation of Moses is a major point, as he later concludes:

This is the substance of what Moses has delivered concerning the creation of the world; which being short, and rather suited to the capacities of the people he designed to instruct, than written for the satisfaction of a philosophic enquirer, has left room for various explications and the setting up of several very different hypotheses.<sup>43</sup>

He then reiterates the theories of Descartes, Whiston and Burnet. Holberg does not contextualize Moses in this way, but on the contrary leaves Moses as the final word on creation. This fundamental structural difference might be interpreted as Holberg succumbing to the censorship of protestant Denmark, but it might also be read as a deliberate decision to end the unanswerable dilemma of reason versus revelation. While Sale's text lingers in undecided reflection, Holberg's makes an explicit resolution in order to get on with the story. This strategy of presenting dilemmas which either remain open or, as in questions of revelation, are answered by a culturally biased subjective decision to settle for 'what we are obliged to believe',<sup>44</sup> is characteristic of the later part of Holberg's authorship.

Holberg also makes additions. He follows Sale in rejecting Isaac La Peyrère and the preadamite theories, but whereas Sale uses considerable energy on a discussion in scientific terms as to whether blacks and whites both can be descendants of Adam, Holberg argues in moral terms from the fundamental equality of all men, giving an independent reference to the German scholar Johann Albert Fabricius, whom Holberg had visited in Hamburg 1726.<sup>45</sup> The idea of moral equality rests on a traditional interpretation of the Old Testament; we are all descendants of Adam. This combination of traditional Bible reading and a supposedly modern ideal of toleration is characteristic of Holberg. As Holberg in contrast to Sale is writing a specifically Jewish history, it is of special interest to him to refute Peyrère's theory that Adam was ancestor only of the Jews,<sup>46</sup> whereas other 'nations' descend from persons living before and parallel to Adam; all nations, according to Holberg's conservative biblical interpretation, originate in the mythic unity of the universal history.

After this truly universal part of history, *An Universal History* is structured as separate post-deluvian national histories, amongst which the history of the Jews, written by Psalmanazar, is prominent. Holberg follows this account from the times of Abraham to Saul, sharing the respect for the biblical text and an interest in prophecies and miracles. Sometimes, Holberg is even more eager to defend miracles than Psalmanazar. An interesting example of the discussion of miracles is Jos. 10.13, where it is claimed that the sun stood still as Joshua fought at Gibeon. Following Psalmanazar's account, Holberg mentions and rejects the critique of this



miracle made by Spinoza, Maimonides, Le Clerc and even by Grotius, Holberg's personal favourite, but he makes one deviation as he adds to Psalmanazar's arguments in favour of the miracle that: 'All these forced explanations can have no impact, as Scripture explicitly states that the sun, as a result of Joshua's prayer, stood still in heaven'.<sup>47</sup> Later in the discussion, Psalmanazar entertains the possibility that although the sun certainly stood still, the second miracle of that day, the hailstorm of stones, might have had a natural explanation. Holberg dismisses this idea with a comment that reveals that he is not really interested in a discussion of individual miracles in biblical time:

As for the other miracle, the hailstorm of stones, the same author, like Grotius before him, has also wanted to make this into natural hail; but this can be answered by the same arguments as before, namely, that the book of Joshua mentions miraculous hail, and that if it pleases God to make a large miracle, he can also make a smaller. But now it is time to get back to the history.<sup>48</sup>

There is a certain discrepancy between the thorough recapitulation of different arguments and this light hearted dismissal in favour of miracles followed by a sudden urge to push on with the historical narrative. This is typical of Holberg's taciturn irony following his repeated decisions to believe the unbelievable.

A more political theme arises when Holberg arrives at 1. Sam. 8.1 where the Jewish state goes from theocracy to monarchy. The interpretation of this biblical passage was important to such major Lutheran historians and ideologues as H. Wandal and H.G. Masius who connected absolutism and 1. Sam. 8. in a Danish context, and Holberg uses the opportunity to argue that the Old Testament implies that monarchy is the best way to avoid corruption and an immoral priesthood.<sup>49</sup> In this interpretation he clearly deviates from Psalmanazar who seems to be more aligned with both Scripture and English politics as he emphasizes Samuel's argument of 'all the mischiefs and grievances they were likely to suffer from a king'.<sup>50</sup> Earlier, in a general discussion of the government of the Jews, Holberg had already given a detailed interpretation of the rise and fall of Jewish theocracy and the transition to a monarchy that gradually lost the immediate divine regulation and guidance under Solomon, a similar serious discussion of theocracy is not found in the *Universal History*.<sup>51</sup> Holberg generally does not demonize the Jewish king in the way radical Enlightenment figures would tend to do,<sup>52</sup> on the contrary, as a convinced adherent of absolutism he generally defends their weaknesses and he remains apologetic when he arrives at the Herod dynasty. Thus he argues against Josephus that the death of Herod was no miraculous vengeance from God, but the natural death of an old man.<sup>53</sup> When he gets to the glorious regime of Solomon, he depicts it almost as an allegory of a modern absolutist state with generals, ministers, secretaries of



state, privy councillor and a chancellor; all governed by the supreme king.<sup>54</sup> As his main source here is the ancient Josephus and not contemporary European writers, Holberg seems more inclined towards an independent and absolutist reading of the Jewish kingdom. The promiscuity and idolatry that cause the decline of Solomon and bring God's vengeance upon the kingdom clearly showed the importance of the personal moral example of the king.<sup>55</sup> However, when Holberg returns to the causes of the downfall of the Jewish monarchy a few pages later, the providential version of God's wish to punish the sins of the people is balanced with two historical circumstances distinct from divine will, namely, jealousy among the Jewish tribes and the growth of neighbouring monarchies.<sup>56</sup>

Connected to the issue of theocracy and monarchy is the question whether the early Jewish ceremonies were derived from Egyptian customs. This theory had been formulated by the English orientalist John Spencer in *De Legibus Hebraeorum* (1685), today a pioneer work of comparative religion, but very controversial at the time.<sup>57</sup> Holberg dedicates a whole chapter to the discussion of Spencer, and like his source Psalmanazar he tends to join the many critics of Spencer, but in a typical Holbergian 'Deliberation' at the end of this compilation, he shows some personal ambiguity:

About Spencer's work one may say, that if he had only derived certain ceremonies from the Egyptians, his Systema could not only be excused, but be considered useful and edifying, especially since he demonstrates what God intended with this and thereby makes God a sensible legislator who grounds his regulations in the conditions of the times [. . .]. But he has immersed himself so much in this material that he has transformed the holiest of things, even prophecies and oracles, into Egyptian ceremonies and has thereby fallen into plain ungodliness. [. . .] If this [. . .] author had found the middle way in these matters, his deliberations would not only have been innocent, but even useful.<sup>58</sup>

So Spencer's thesis is thoroughly presented, and even if it is also thoroughly rejected, Holberg leaves his Danish audience in a state of ambivalence as to this important issue, which basically is about the nature of providence and the actions of God as a 'sensible lawmaker' adjusting to the historical conditions. There is an obvious tension between the pure providentialism in the introduction and this influence from Spencer.

### **Prideaux: the quarrel with deism**

Humphrey Prideaux and Jaques Basnage are authors with ideological profiles that Holberg can relate to, and unlike Sale and Psalmanazar they constitute authorial presences that he often explicitly comments on or deviates from. They might seem liberal to the conservatives of their time, but are still ardently defending prophecies as well as miracles. They both consider



the history of the Jews as evidence of providence, although they might not highlight this quite as much as Holberg.<sup>59</sup>

Holberg is an ardent admirer of Prideaux, refers to his works as early as 1729,<sup>60</sup> uses him extensively as source in *General Church History* and *Life of Heroes* and mentions him as one of four historians to whom he will always return in his *Third Autobiographical Letter*. Prideaux, whose main ambition it is to connect the Old and the New Testament, emphasizes prophesies and Holberg's text reflects this, even if his interest is just as much focused on the discussion of miracles in the Old Testament.<sup>61</sup> Holberg gets an opportunity to mention his favourite example of the sun one more time in connection with the sundial of Ahaz, which God miraculously sets back ten degrees to confirm his promise of ten more years for the sick king Hezekiah. In the discussion of this miracle, Holberg mentions a recent publication, *The Sun Standing Still in the Days of Joshua*, a minor pamphlet of thirty-six pages that had appeared in London as recently as 1739.<sup>62</sup> The anonymous author, Abraham Oakes, accepts miracles by Moses and the prophets in connection with heavenly messages, but on rationalist grounds he rejects the sun standing still (it would mean stopping the universe). Like Holberg, he compares that miracle with the sundial of Ahaz, but claims that the latter was a very local miracle moving only the shadow on a particular dial, not bringing the universe itself to a halt.<sup>63</sup> This is a distinction missed by Holberg as he rejects the sceptical Oakes, defends both miracles and returns to Prideaux, who had been the target of some ironic remarks by Oakes.

There is a notable ambiguity at the core of Holberg's text as he follows the debate on several individual miracles and then repeatedly dismisses all Bible criticism in this matter on the principle that God can perform any miracle that is referred to in Scripture. At one point he defines his general attitudes towards the critique of miracles:

As the temple was ruined [by the Babylonians] the miraculous age of the Jews is terminated; the benefits that God later bestowed on the nation, was ordinarily through natural means. I have not forgotten in this history of mine to tell all the many large miracles, with which God has favoured this people, especially when there are witnesses that cannot be refuted, and where the words of Scripture have no other explanation. But where the words can be explained differently [. . .] I have shown the opinions of some learned men.<sup>64</sup>

Holberg's main compromise is to admit philological critique, but not to question miracles clearly stated in the text. He equivocates concerning lesser, questionable miracles, for example the ravens that fed the prophet Elijah.<sup>65</sup> On the one hand he admits that critics had argued that the Hebrew word for 'raven' might in fact refer to the local population, but even in this case he makes his trademark comment: 'I will only state, that it is strange to doubt a lesser miracle, when you accept so many bigger ones'.<sup>66</sup> This might



be taken to imply the possibility of refusing all miracles, and despite his general acceptance of miracles, Holberg would certainly be aware of this daring dimension of his discourse. In the second volume, Holberg mentions alleged miracles with much more scepticism, except for the ones conducted by Jesus and of course the overarching miracle of the survival of Jewish culture. In contrast to this uneasy negotiation of miracles, prophets and prophecies are mentioned regularly throughout the work.

Holberg shares with Prideaux a special concern with deism, which both address critically but with considerable interest and an affinity for discussing the borderline between natural and revealed religion. Deism is not only present as a contemporary critique of providence, but also as part of the allegorical level where Jewish sectarianism is interpreted in terms of theological discrepancies within the church. Jewish history consists in a plot of dispersion and fragmentation that is not only due to external threats, but also internal conflicts on insignificant questions of faith:

I have stated, that the Jews [. . .] have remained loyal to the law of Moses and have never again succumbed to idolatry, but what gives stuff to subsequent church history are sundry interpretations of the books of Scripture, that have resulted in religious sects among them, such as Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Karaites and Samaritans.<sup>67</sup>

Both Prideaux and Basnage provide an overview of these five Jewish sects, and both authors, just like Holberg, are critical of sectarianism as a historical decay. This was one of the main political lessons drawn from Josephus by Christian writers of Jewish history,<sup>68</sup> and in Holberg it certainly converges with the eclectic critique of sects that became apparent in his later essays. In this overlap of sources, Holberg relies on Prideaux, and they construct a parallel between Jewish and Christian church history. Significantly, Holberg associates the Sadducees with ‘Deists and Epicureans’, an allusion to contemporary theological debate that is simply a translation of Prideaux’ statement of the same: ‘In sum, they were Epicurean Deists’.<sup>69</sup> They both mention and reject the radical deist theory that Christ was a member of the Essene sect.<sup>70</sup> Prideaux spends a lot of energy refuting this idea by quoting ancient sources on the Essenes explicitly in order to instruct the deists as the implied readers, against whose ideas his whole book is directed.<sup>71</sup>

When Holberg uses the phrase ‘Church-history’ he alludes to his own *General Church History* that also focused on the diversion of an original, pure and simple truth into new competing sects, and here he had already briefly discussed the Jewish sects. This motif of decline is repeated in *Jewish History* as the Karaites are losing ground and the Pharisees dominating. There are tempting parallels between Jewish and Christian sectarianism, and in the chapter ‘On the Jewish sects’ the Sadducees are compared not only to deists, but to Christian ‘Pelagians’, deniers of original sin.<sup>72</sup> The Essenes are seen as monks,<sup>73</sup> and, of course:



the Caraites are to Pharisees as Protestants are to Roman Catholics, in so far as they have reverence for the opinions of the church fathers and even quote them to explain Scripture, but they do not hold them as high as the word of God.<sup>74</sup>

Holberg repeats the parallel a few pages further on and thereby strengthens this anti-Catholic theme. He is generally highly critical of Catholics in his writings and it is not surprising that the history of the Jews offers him ample opportunity to further this criticism, not only by implying that Catholics are comparable to Pharisees, but even more directly, through the description of horrible persecutions of Jews performed by Catholics through history.<sup>75</sup>

This parallel was already made by Prideaux when describing the submission of the Jews by the Syrian king Antiochus:

The Syrian Soldiers under this Overseer were the chief Missionaries, and by them this conversion of the Jews to the King's Religion was effected in the same manner as a late neighbouring Prince converted his Protestant Subjects to the Idolatrous Superstition of Rome, which falls very little short of being altogether as bad.<sup>76</sup>

However, whereas Prideaux refers to the Huguenots in France, Holberg's partial translation alludes ambiguously to persecution of Jews and other heretics by Rome and Spain:

[. . .] so it seems, that this mission of Antioch is a model, that the popes and other Roman rulers have copied, and that nothing is missing except that Antioch had established a holy inquisition and thereby had brought persecution to the state of perfection that we observe today.<sup>77</sup>

Holberg may be blurring Prideaux' parallel because of ambivalence towards the French Huguenots who had threatened the inner stability of the French absolutist state, the worst possible evil in Holberg's politics.<sup>78</sup> The possibility of using the Jewish history as a critique of Catholics is however even more relevant to Holberg's last major source, the French Huguenot Jacques Basnage (1653–1723).

### Basnage and the criticism of Catholics

Basnage's book *Histoire des Juifs* was published in French the year Holberg went to Oxford (1706), and two years later an English translation, approved by Basnage himself, was published in London. Basnage rapidly won 'a reputation as the first historian sympathetic to the Jews and their history'.<sup>79</sup> The work received much attention and was criticized for its liberal attitude towards the Jews. In fact, in our assessment of Holberg's position we have to be aware of the presence of a reactionary criticism of Basnage's



works. A telling example is Robert Jenkin, who criticized Basnage for being too critical of Biblical mysteries and too sympathetic to the Jews. Jenkin insists on the common prejudice denied by Basnage that the Jews were in the habit of slaughtering Christian children.<sup>80</sup> It is however also received as part of contemporary confessional debate, as when the English translator, Thomas Taylor, in his dedication interprets the Jewish history as a ‘standing Evidence of Divine Vengeance upon Unbelief’ and promotes Basnage’s work as a vehicle for confronting radicalism: ‘if late Posterity, in so stupendous a manner, suffer for the Sins and Infidelity of their Ancestors, what Fate may we suppose is likely to pursue our Tribes of Atheists, Deists and Apostates’.<sup>81</sup> Such aggressive polemic is not reflected in Holberg’s modest contextualization, but it is imaginable that Basnage and the controversies his book stirred up gave the young student an idea of the contemporary relevance of Jewish history to the debate on religion in society.

Holberg compiles Basnage in the same manner as he did Prideaux. He can only use a fraction of the source, but sentences and paragraphs are often translated directly. On some occasions Holberg reinforces the liberal tendency, as when he bolsters Basnage’s apologetic remarks on the Talmud by references to Fabricius and the Hebraist John Lightfoot.<sup>82</sup> On other occasions he refers to Schudt’s criticism of some details in Basnage’s account.<sup>83</sup> It has been pointed out that although Holberg uses the ethnographical perspectives of Schudt, there is a basic difference of opinion as Schudt suggests conversion and assimilation for the Jewish population, whereas Holberg strongly opposes the idea of forced conversion both on moral grounds and because he sees a providential dimension in the continued presence of Jewish culture.<sup>84</sup> In his *General Church History*, Holberg had used Basnage’s critical account of the persecution of Jews in Spain at the end of the fifteenth century,<sup>85</sup> and this is also an important part of the last chapter in *Jewish History*. Holberg seems strikingly modern on this point, but the structure, as well as the specifics and anecdotes of this depiction, are compiled from Basnage, and so are the moral and pragmatic condemnations of the event.<sup>86</sup>

Basnage’s work may be seen as primarily an attack on the Catholic Church, reducing the apparent sympathy towards the Jews to a secondary effect derived from anti-Catholic polemics.<sup>87</sup> Such an analysis is also relevant to Holberg and his use of Basnage, but with some modification. Holberg inherits Basnage’s parallel between Catholics and Pharisees, but he also states at the beginning of the chapter on the situation of the Jews in Italy: ‘I have already demonstrated that no rulers have protected the Jews more than the popes of Rome’.<sup>88</sup> Even if the popes had pragmatic and financial reasons for their tolerance, the important point to Holberg is that everybody is liable to take part in the common persecution and exploitation.

Basnage uses Jewish history in a polemic against Spinozists, deists and radicals, trying to prove the truth of the prophecies and the presence of providence.<sup>89</sup> Holberg’s similar assertion in the introduction and conclusion of his text, emphasizes the divine intervention even more strongly



than Basnage, and his quarrel with radicals is even more distinct, as is his recurrent defence of miracles. But as we have seen, this polemic has a dialogical form through which the Danish audience would be exposed to a lot of radical ideas and the complexities of interpreting the Bible which probably would be felt as quite challenging. They for instance get a fairly balanced impression of a highly controversial figure such as Spinoza, based both on Sale's text in the first chapters, and on Basnage's in the later parts. Holberg explains Spinoza's account of Prophets with interest, albeit with the casual remark that it is 'ungodly'.<sup>90</sup> His final quote from Spinoza is left uncommented, but it is clearly something Holberg himself would tend to sympathize with: 'Your faith is sufficient, when you conduct a godly and quiet life'.<sup>91</sup> At this point, he labels Spinoza a 'deist', and although he has earlier called the *Tractatus* 'a system of atheism', it is fair to say that Holberg, compared to Basnage, leaves a surprisingly sympathetic impression of Spinoza,<sup>92</sup> not unlike the depiction of those deists he finds to be honest truth-seekers in his later essays.

No doubt, Sale, Psalmanazar, Prideaux, Basnage and Holberg are all addressing other, contemporary issues while seemingly writing about the Jews. Holberg, however, is even more distant than any of the others from Jewish culture as such; his role as an absolutist historian frequently shines through but it is evident that Jewish history functions as a clay in which he moulds his personal ideological profile using radical and religious ideas within a historical frame. His conservative biblical attitude is demonstrated again and again throughout the 1,500 pages, but even though this work is largely a compilation, Holberg is enough of a presence to give its conservatism a flair of personal ambiguity. Compared with truly conservative religious historians, Holberg had the wits to use a rather old-fashioned religious view as the foundation for a tolerant attitude.

## Notes

- 1 *Jødiske Historie fra Verdens Begyndelse fortsat til disse Tider* 2 vols. (Copenhagen: 1742).
- 2 *Jüdische Geschichte von Erschaffung der Welt bis auf gegenwärtige Zeiten*, trans. Georg August Detharding (Altona und Flensburg: 1747). Detharding translated several of Holberg's works. A part of *Jødiske Historie* was published in Swedish 1752 as vol. 6 of *Flavii Josephi Judiske historia*, 6. vols.
- 3 Julius August Remer, *Handbuch der älteren Geschichte von Schöpfung der Welt bis auf die große Völkerwanderung*, 3. ed. (Braunschweig: 1794), 240. This comment seems typical of historical literature from 1790 to this day. The works referred to are: Joachim Lange, *Historia Ecclesiastica Vet. Testamenti a mundo condito per septem periodos usque ad Christum Natum* (1718), Johann Franz Buddeus, *Historia ecclesiastica veteris testamenti* (1715–18), Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations. From the Declension of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the Time of Christ*, (1715–17), Antoine Augustin Calmet *Histoire de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament et des Juifs* (1718), Christian Bastholm, *Den jødiske Historie fra Verdens Skabelse til Jerusalems sidste Ødelæggelse* (1777)



- (German translation 1786), Isaac-Joseph Berruyer, *Histoire du peuple de Dieu depuis son origine jusqu'à la venue du Messie* (1728/1734), Bernhard Mahy, *Histoire du peuple hebreu* (1742), Jean-Louis Maizonnet, *Histoire du Peuple d'Israel* (1779).
- 4 Francis Bull, *Ludvig Holberg som historiker* (Kristiania:1913), 110, Sigurd Høst, *Om Holbergs historiske skrifter* (Kristiania:1913), 180. Though relevant, *Jewish History* is hardly mentioned in Sune Berthelsen's 'Holberg – The Historian', in *Holberg*, ed. Gunnar Sivertsen and Eivind Tjønneland (Bergen: 2008), nor in *Ludvig Holberg: A European Writer. A Study in influence and Reception*, ed. Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: 1994). For more positive appreciation, Torgeir Skorgen, "'Guds Kiæledegge": Holbergs hellige jødiske historie og den sekulære etnografiens blikk på jøder', and his 'Protestantisk toleranse: Samvittighetsfrihet i Holbergs *Niels Klim* og *Jødiske historie*', both in *Historikeren Holberg*, ed. Jørgen Sejersted and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen (Oslo: 2014) 325–343, 345–364. For the context of the Jews in Copenhagen, see Martin Schwarz Lausten, *De fromme og jøderne* (Copenhagen: 2000), 107–112.
  - 5 Johann Adolph Scheibe, 'Nachricht von dem Leben und den Schriften Ludwigs, Freyherrns von Holberg' in Ludvig Holberg, *Peter Paars, ein komisches Heldengedicht*. Neue, vermehrte und verbesserte Uebersetzung. Nebst einer Nachricht von dem Leben und den Schriften des Vervassers, ed. J.A. Scheibe. 27–180 (Copenhagen, Leipzig: 1764), 38, 73, and 104.
  - 6 See the respective chapters on these works.
  - 7 Oskar Mendelsohn, *Jødenes Historie i Norge gjennom 300 år*, 2 vols. (Oslo: 1987) I, 33 is ambivalent about Holberg's representations of Jews but finds him typical of attitudes at the time. Sören Koch, 'En naturlig rettsorden for det dansk-norske kongeriket. En rettshistorisk analyse av Ludvig Holbergs lærebok i natur- og folkerett' (PhD diss., University of Oslo: 2015), 348, discusses Holberg's tolerance towards Jews in Denmark in *Law of Nature*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: 1728), which doubled the references to Jews and Mosaic law from the first edition.
  - 8 Mendelsohn, *Jødenes Historie*, vol. 1, 12.
  - 9 11. June, in *Hans Mickelsens Comoedier II* (1724): part III, scene 2. Cf. Mendelsohn, *Jødenes Historie*, 33.
  - 10 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 692.
  - 11 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 452.
  - 12 Lausten, *De fromme og jøderne*, 262–278.
  - 13 Frank E. Manuel, *The Broken Staff. Judaism through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge, MA: 1992) 162.
  - 14 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 1–2.
  - 15 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 434. Jacques Basnage, *The History of the Jews from Jesus Christ to The Present Time* [1706], (London: 1708), VI, 1.1.
  - 16 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 736.
  - 17 Holberg accumulated epigrams through three editions in 1737, 1743 and finally *Epigrammatum Libri septem* (Copenhagen: 1749). For parallels between the epigrams and *Jødisk Historie*, see F. J. Billeskov Jansen, *Holberg som epigrammatiker og essayist*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: 1938–9) vol. 1, 223–244.
  - 18 'Compendium Historicæ Judaicæ', in *Epigrammatum Libri septem*, 196–197. I am indebted to Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen for translating Holberg's epigram from Latin. See Jens Justesen, *Ludvig Holbergs Epigrammer* (Copenhagen: 1863), 173, for a metric Danish version.
  - 19 John Toland, 'Two problems concerning the Jewish nation and religion', in *Nazarenus*, [Appendix], (London: 1718), 5. Toland sees the Jews as profoundly influenced by Egyptian culture (cf. the remark on Spencer below) and generally wants to exclude providence from history.



- 20 Manuel, *The Broken Staff*, 175.
- 21 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 3
- 22 Frank E. Manuel, 'Israel and the Enlightenment', *Daedalus* 111 (1982): 40.
- 23 Cf. G.J. Buelow, 'Originality, genius, plagiarism in English criticism of the eighteenth century', *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 21 (1990): 121.
- 24 Detharding, 'Vorbericht des Uebersetzers' in Holberg, *Jüdische Geschichte*, c3.
- 25 Anon. [George Sale, George Psalmanazar et al.], *An Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time to the Present: Compiled from Original Authors* Vol I. [1737], 2. ed. (London: 1740). Holberg refers to this as 'the English universal history.'
- 26 Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* (AD 94) in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray et al. (Cambridge, MA: 1930–65. Holberg also refers to Josephus, *de Bello Judaico* (AD 75–9), in Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray et al. (Cambridge, MA: 1927–8).
- 27 Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations. From the Declension of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the Time of Christ*, 9th ed., 4 vols. London: 1725. Part I [1715] = vols. 1–2. Part II [1718] = vols. 3–4.
- 28 Jacques Basnage, *The History of the Jews, from Jesus Christ to the present Time Containing their Antiquities, their Religion, their Rites, the Dispersion of the Ten Tribes in the East, and the Persecution this Nation has Suffered in the West* [1706] (London: 1708). Holberg refers to Basnage as 'Banage.'
- 29 Holberg later compares and defends Le Clerc and Grotius as Bible critics in *Epistler* I, 32. Holberg had met Le Clerc twice in Amsterdam in 1726.
- 30 *Jødisk Historie* I, 441, Prideaux, *Old and New Testament Connected* I, vol. 1, 4. Holberg comments in the 'Ad virum perillustrem eipstola tertia' that his volumes of *An Universal History* did not yet cover the reign of the Jewish kings, and that he had to make do with Josephus and the Bible.
- 31 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 171, Basnage *History of the Jews* book I, chapter 2, § 5.
- 32 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 155. Cf. Jonathan M. Elukin 'Jacques Basnage and the history of the Jews: Anti-Catholic polemic and historical allegory in the republic of letters', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53 (1992): 610.
- 33 See chapter 8.
- 34 Compare *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, book 3 with vol. 2, book 13, the only two books not based on chronological periodization.
- 35 Tamara Griggs 'Universal history from Counter-Reformation to Enlightenment', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4 (2007): 229.
- 36 Guido Abbattista 'The business of Paternoster Row. Towards a publishing history of the 'Universal History' (1736–65)', *Publishing History*, 17 (1985): 5.
- 37 Psalmanazar *Memoirs of \*\*\*\*. Commonly known by the Name of George Psalmanazar. A Reputed Native of Formosa. Written by himself, In order to be published after his Death: Containing An Account of his Education, Travels, Adventures, Connections, Literary Productions, And Pretended Conversion from Heathenism to Chritianity* [1764], 2nd ed. (London: 1765), 245.
- 38 Psalmanazar *Memoirs of \*\*\*\**, 250.
- 39 Psalmanazar emphasizes the pretence of a collective text as an illusion when it comes to the initial parts written by Sale (Psalmanazar *Memoirs of \*\*\*\**, 246)
- 40 This will be referred to as Sale's text, although it had been edited by Psalmanazar. Cf Abbattista 'The Business of Paternoster Row', 14.
- 41 Anon. [George Sale, George Psalmanazar etc.], *An Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time to the Present: Compiled from Original Authors*, 2. ed., vol. 1. (London: 1740), 35 (paginated as 43).
- 42 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 7.



- 43 [Sale], *Universal History*, 35 (paginated as 43).
- 44 This is a phrase Holberg uses elsewhere in his authorship when it comes to Biblical mysteries: Epistle 83.
- 45 Johann Albertus Fabricius, *Dissertatio critica de hominibus orbis nostri incolis, specie et ortu avito inter se non differentibus* (Hamburg: 1721).
- 46 Cf Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac la Peyrère (1596–1676)* (Leiden: 1987), 2.
- 47 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 179. [Psalmazar], *Universal history* I, 559.
- 48 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 180.
- 49 The front page of the first book of Hans Wandal, *Juris Regii [...] Liber 1–6* (Copenhagen 1663–72) reads: ‘Liber Primus, De Jure Regis Israelitici, a Samuele lib. I c. VIII descripto.’ On Masius’ debate with Thomasius on this issue, see Frank Grunert ‘Zur aufgeklärten Kritik am theokratischen Absolutismus. Der Streit zwischen Hector Gottfried Masius und Christian Thomasius über Ursprung und Begründung der summa potestas’, in *Christian Thomasius (1655–1728). Neue Forschungen im Kontext der Frühaufklärung*, ed. Friedrich Vollhardt (Tübingen: 1997), 51–77. See also chapter 4, 81.
- 50 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 308. [Psalmazar], *Universal History*, 758.
- 51 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 189.
- 52 Manuel, ‘Israel and the “Enlightenment”’ 44, uses Voltaire and Holbach as examples of radicals who demonize Jewish kings.
- 53 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 149.
- 54 *Jødisk Historie*, vol 1, 368.
- 55 *Jødisk Historie*, vol 1, 386.
- 56 *Jødisk Historie*, vol 1, 396.
- 57 ‘Spencer’s work laid the foundations for the attitude to the biblical Hebrews of Toland, Voltaire, Rousseau, Giannone, and a host of ‘enlightened’ figures; indeed, until the rediscovery of Spencer’s work in the last two decades, it was assumed that such a marginalization of Jewish importance was a product solely of the eighteenth century.’ Dmitri Levitin, ‘From sacred history to the history of religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in European historiography from Reformation to “Enlightenment”’, *The Historical Journal*, 55 (2012): 1136. Holberg clearly shows an interest in Spencer beyond what he found in Prideaux.
- 58 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 273.
- 59 See Humphrey Prideaux ‘A Letter to the Deists appended to Life of Mahomet’, in *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Display’d in the Life of Mahomet. With A Discourse annex’d, for the Vindicating of Christianity from this Charge; Offered to the Consideration of the Deists of the present Age* (London: 1697), 96. (Not identical with his better known *Letter to the Deists*).
- 60 *Danmarks og Norges Beskrivelse*, 682.
- 61 Manuel, *The Broken Staff*, 181, states that the tendency of the time was to shift focus from miracles to prophecies. This is reflected in vol. 2 as Holberg leaves the discussion of miracles but remains interested in prophecies.
- 62 Full title is *The Sun Standing Still in the Days of Joshua. Rationally Accounted for*, the anonymous writer is unknown to Holberg, but today known as Abraham Oakes.
- 63 Anon. [Abraham Oakes], *The Sun Standing Still in the Days of Joshua. Rationally Accounted for* (London: 1739) 13.
- 64 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 475.
- 65 Book of 1. Kings, 17. 4.
- 66 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 412.
- 67 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 601.
- 68 Manuel, *The Broken Staff*, 121.
- 69 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 20, Prideaux, *Old and New Testament Connected* II, vol. 3, 472.



- 70 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 31. The theory was apparently propagated by the German deist and spinozist Johann Georg Wachter in the early eighteenth century, Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: 2001), 651.
- 71 Prideaux, *Old and New Testament Connected* II, vol. 3, 513.
- 72 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 19–33.
- 73 Such interpretations have a long history going back to Eusebius; Elukin, ‘Jacques Basnage’, 604
- 74 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 24, cf. 26. Prideaux, *Old and New Testament Connected* II, vol. 3, 476. On the frequent analogy of Karaites and reformed Christians, see Elukin, ‘Jacques Basnage’, 619.
- 75 See Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, ‘Den antikatolske Holberg: Kirke, stat og naturret i skyggen af Samuel Pufendorf’, *Historisk Tidsskrift* 117 (2017) (forthcoming).
- 76 Prideaux, *Old and New Testament Connected*, II, vol. 3, 251.
- 77 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 1, 666.
- 78 Cf Epistle X in Holberg, *Epistles*, vol. 1 (1748).
- 79 Elukin, ‘Jacques Basnage’, 606.
- 80 Robert Jenkin, *Remarks on some Books Lately Publish’d viz. Basnage’s History of the Jews. Whiston’s eight Sermons. Lock’s Paraphrase and Notes on St. Paul’s Epistles. Le Clerc’s Bibliothéque Choisie* (London: 1709), 44.
- 81 Thomas Taylor, ‘The Dedication’ in Basnage, *The History of the Jews*, iv.
- 82 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 466, 473. Holberg also has many critical remarks on the Talmud.
- 83 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 712. He uses Schudt frequently when discussing Jews in Germany and gypsies at the end of the work.
- 84 Skorgen, ‘“Guds”, 340.
- 85 *Almindelig Kierke-Historie*, vol. 2, 966.
- 86 Cf. Basnage, *The History of the Jews*, VII, 692; Holberg, *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 645.
- 87 Cf. Elukin, ‘Jacques Basnage’.
- 88 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 675. After this statement, he follows Basnage quite closely on the details.
- 89 Elukin, ‘Jacques Basnage’, 608.
- 90 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 541.
- 91 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 702.
- 92 *Jødisk Historie*, vol. 2, 700; Basnage, *History of the Jews* VII, 32, 742.





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Part IV

Texts





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# 11 Writings by Holberg in English

*Eiliv Vinje*

Many of Holberg's works were translated into different European languages during his lifetime. The greater part of his oeuvre appeared in German, parts of it in Swedish, French, Dutch and English. Later when Holberg had acquired status as a classical author of Danish national literature, new translations would be published mirroring changing tastes and images of 'father Holberg'. To study Holberg's translation history is to study the reception of different 'Holbergs' through space and time. The basis for such an investigation already exists in H. Ehrencron-Müller's magnificent three volume Holberg bibliography but would far exceed the scope of a chapter in the present context. The following pages will therefore limit themselves to a presentation of translations of Holberg's works into English, which well illustrate the point that different texts have dominated at different times. They include the mock-heroic poem *Peder Paars*, the fictional travelogue *Niels Klim's Travels Underground*, selections of essays from *Moral Reflexions* and *Epistles*, the textbooks *Introduction to Universal History* and *A Short System of Geography* and last but not least twenty comedies, which surprisingly did not start appearing until one and a half centuries after they were written – and staged – in Copenhagen.

This represents only a limited part of Holberg's complete oeuvre. What is missing is most of his works on history (cf. chapter 8) and the greater part of his moral philosophy (biographies, essays and his once so popular work on natural law (cf. chapters 2–4).

## The eighteenth century: *Niels Klim*, *Universal History*, *Geography*

*Niels Klim's Travels Underground* was first published in Latin in 1741 and in a revised edition in 1745. *Niels Klim* is the one work of Holberg's that has enjoyed continuous popularity from the beginning. It was an immediate success and was translated into French, Dutch and German in 1741, and over the years it has appeared in many editions and reprints. By 1941, the American lexicographer Philip Babcock Gove, with some help from H. Ehrencron-Müller's bibliography,<sup>1</sup> numbered fifty-nine editions in eleven



languages.<sup>2</sup> Today we may add at least fourteen editions/reprints.<sup>3</sup> It was translated into English in 1742.<sup>4</sup>

The English translator is unknown and the edition is without any introduction or presentation. In the original Latin version, the prose text is filled with verse quotations from classical authors. The English edition gives these quotations in Latin, without translation.

Critics and literary historians have stressed the fact that the English version of *Niels Klim* was reissued in 1746, 1749 and 1755. This is true but must not be taken as evidence of good sales. According to Ehrencron-Müller, each re-issue was exactly the same print as in the first edition of 1742, but with a new title page.<sup>5</sup> These editions are in fact testimony to the general popularity of the imaginary voyage as a genre.<sup>6</sup>

The original translation of *Niels Klim* was published again in 1812 with minor revisions of spelling and punctuation in a collection of imaginary voyages including *Gulliver's Travels* (Jonathan Swift), *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (Robert Paltock), *Robinson Crusoe* (Daniel Defoe) and *The History of Automathes* (John Kirkby).<sup>7</sup> The introduction by Henry William Weber (1783–1818) reveals limited knowledge of Holberg and his writings and is rather critical. *Niels Klim* was not 'one of his [Holberg's] early efforts'; it belongs to a later period of his career. And it was not written first in Danish and then translated into Latin. Weber does not like the fiction of reasoning trees and thinks that the satire on the abuses of the government of Denmark is unlikely to meet with success in England and France, and the English translation is harsh and poor in style. He finally compares *Niels Klim* to *Gulliver's Travels* with the predictable conclusion that Swift so infinitely exceeds Holberg 'that any comparison between their productions is almost out of the question'.<sup>8</sup>

Two new translations were published during the first half of the nineteenth century, in 1828 and 1845. The 1828 edition<sup>9</sup> contains both the 'Apologetic preface' and a few additions inserted by Holberg in the second Latin edition of 1745. We do not know who translated the text for the 1828-edition but it differs significantly from the 1742-edition (cf. the comparison below). It has a very short preface mostly lifted from the English edition of Holberg's autobiography – *Memoirs* – which was published in London the preceding year (cf. below).

This 1828 edition of *Niels Klim* was reviewed in three English journals.<sup>10</sup> One of the critics misses a biographical sketch. A second one finds the description to be at too general a level (in comparison with *Gulliver's Travels*). A third is unhappy about the English translation that 'is very poorly executed; and is indeed so indifferently done, as to lose much of the wit and satirical humour of the original'.<sup>11</sup>

The third translation of *Niels Klim*,<sup>12</sup> from 1845, was by John Gierlow who also wrote 'a sketch of the author's life'. *Niels Klim*, he says, 'though written so many years ago, contains many satirical hits, exceedingly applicable



1742 – anonymous	1828 – anonymous	1845 – John Gierlow
In the Year 1664, after I had pass'd my several Examinations in the University of Copenhagen, and had deservedly obtained the Character, which is there call'd Laudable, by the Votes of my Judges, as well Philosophers as Divines, I prepar'd for my Return into my native Country; and accordingly put myself aboard a Ship bound for Bergen in Norway, dignify'd indeed with various Marks of Honour from the gentlemen of the several Faculties, but in my Fortunes quite impoverished.	Having passed my examinations at the University of Copenhagen, and attained to the degree <i>laudabilis</i> both in theology and philosophy, I made preparations for returning to my native country, and embarked in a vessel bound for Bergen, in Norway. This was in the year 1664. I was furnished with glittering testimonials from the professors of both the sciences I had studied, but was extremely bare of money [...]	In the year 1664, after graduating at the Academy of Copenhagen, in Theology and Philosophy, I prepared to return to my father-land, and took passage in a ship bound for the city of Bergen, in Norway. I had been furnished with brilliant testimonials from both faculties, and wanted only money [...]

to the present time'.<sup>13</sup> However, the text is drastically abridged – chapter 6, for instance, on religion (pages 36–38), is shortened from ten to three pages so that the satire is reduced and the moralizing disappears. This is noticeable from the very beginning. Above is a brief comparison of the opening lines of the three editions.

A new edition did not appear until 1960, this one by James I. McNelis Jr.<sup>14</sup> Except for minor changes in spelling and punctuation, the text follows the first English edition (1742) which – according to the editor – is '[t]he best of the three, it is clear and accurate, and the characteristic eighteenth-century style is well suited to the subject matter'.<sup>15</sup> However, additions from the second Latin edition of 1745 are included and marked. The handling of Latin quotations, on the other hand, is not quite successful. Holberg had an itch for Latin quotations, and in the Latin original lines from famous authors such as Ovid, Horace and Persius are inserted in the text and make it a mixture of prose and verse. These quotations are treated differently in the editions of 1742, 1828 and 1845. In the first they appear untranslated and unidentified, in the second they are translated into English but still unidentified and in the third they are chiefly absorbed into the text. The editor of the 1960-edition follows the line of deletion: 'I have decided to leave out all those quotations which contribute little or nothing to the story'.<sup>16</sup> The unfortunate effect of this is the elimination of an important textual element, i.e. the mixture of prose and verse. In the introduction, the editor gives



a detailed description of the literary tradition – imaginary voyages – and emphasizes *Gulliver's Travels* as the most influential source of inspiration.<sup>17</sup>

The 1960-edition was reissued in 2004, with McNelis' introduction and a new preface by Peter Fitting who – in opposition to McNelis – warns us of stressing the relationship with *Gulliver's Travels* and satire too much, because it overshadows other equally important elements of the text, such as utopia and fantasy.<sup>18</sup>

Besides *Niels Klim*, two other works originally in Latin reached an English-speaking audience during the eighteenth century, *Introduction to Universal History* and *A Short System of Geography*, both textbooks for university and grammar schools.

*Synopsis historiæ universalis* was first published in 1733, then translated into English in 1755 by Gregory Sharpe as *Introduction to Universal History*.<sup>19</sup> Sharpe's translation was also used in the subsequent editions of 1758 and 1787.<sup>20</sup> In the Latin original, Holberg uses the erothematic method, i.e. instruction by question and answer. In addition, the parts of the book not belonging to the core syllabus (of the grammar schools) are singled out by lower case letters.

The Latin original was criticized for paying too much attention to ancient history at the expense of recent history. As a result, the revised Danish edition by Nicolai Jonge (1757) was supplemented by so many additions that it was hardly recognizable as a translation of the Latin original. Jonge claims that he modelled his book on Sharpe's English edition. But the books differ so much that any comparison between them would be absurd.<sup>21</sup>

Sharpe, in contrast, sticks mainly to the task of translation. He keeps the erothematic form but drops the use of different characters to signal different levels of reading. Moreover, he adds a lot of supplementary comments in notes, some of which correct the text. As an example, Holberg writes: 'Trade and mechanics are what the English are most ingenious in and fit for'<sup>22</sup> (*Ad artificia & mercaturam aptissimi sunt Angli*.<sup>23</sup>) Sharpe comments:

The English are not over-much obliged to our author for contracting to such narrow bounds the sphere of their abilities: but [...] we have [...] no] reason to regret, what is here insinuated to our disadvantage. So long as the names of Bacon, Newton, Lock, &c. are known in the world, the English have no reason to fear any reproaches of this kind, especially from a Dane.<sup>24</sup>

The second English edition, 1758, has some changes. It is prefaced by a translation of Holberg's textbook on geography, *A Short System of Geography*.<sup>25</sup> In addition, there are changes in the text of *Universal History*. The erothematic method is dropped, notes in margins are introduced and new material is added,<sup>26</sup> *inter alia* a long passage on conditions in England.<sup>27</sup> Some notes are transferred to the main text<sup>28</sup> and new notes are added, some of which are corrective.<sup>29</sup>



A third edition – ‘revised, corrected, and improved’ – by William Radcliffe appeared in 1787. Radcliffe keeps Sharpe’s translation unchanged, but adds a lot of notes.

Interestingly, in the preface of the first English edition (also included in the second and third), Gregory Sharpe links Holberg’s text to a contemporary English debate on problems concerning universal history, i.e. the presentation of the history of all the peoples of the world as one coherent unit. However, the important issue for Sharpe was chronology, and especially Newton’s. This takes up eight out of twenty-one pages of the preface. Holberg’s work is also examined as a text-book and whether or not it is ‘proper for a mere beginner’.<sup>30</sup> However, the comparison with other similar textbooks goes absolutely in favour of Holberg.

There is indeed a very good abridgement by Dr. Howell, published both in Latin and English; but it includes only the four great monarchies [. . .]. The Introduction to Universal History [. . .] by the celebrated Bishop of Meaux, is rather an elegant composition than a useful story. [. . .] And though many performances of the same nature have also been published at home and abroad, by Hearne, Pareus, and others, this [i.e. Holberg’s book] deserves the preference, as well because it includes all history from the creation to the present time, as for the ease and perspicuity of the clue that leads the reader through the several labyrinths of empires, dynasties, kingdoms, states, their origin, declension, revolutions and destruction . . . So . . . if it is not a performance of the first class, neither is it one of those perishable trifles that time sweeps away among the wastes of things.<sup>31</sup>

The editor also appreciates Holberg’s ‘knowledge of ecclesiastical history’. Finally, Holberg is praised for including short abstracts of the lives of famous men, on the grounds that ‘example is known to influence more powerfully than precept’.<sup>32</sup>

One may ask: If Holberg’s text is so excellent as stated by the editor, why doesn’t he let him speak for himself, why this massive ‘voice over’ of additions and supplementary remarks? The simple answer probably is that the adaptations and additions are typical of the textbook genre (cf. about the Danish translation by Jonge above) and they were easy to make in a work with the qualities listed.

### The nineteenth century: *History of Norway*, *Memoires, Peder Paars*

Holberg’s historical magnum opus is *History of Denmark* (3 vols. 1732–5). Of this only forty-six pages appeared in English and they were due to the author and vagabond A. Andersen Feldborg, who lived in England for a long period of time trying to spread knowledge of Danish culture, *inter alia*,



by editing a book on Norwegian history! This work is little more than an English translation of the Danish historian Gustav L. Baden's *History of Norway* (1804).<sup>33</sup> Baden takes us from the earliest times up to the Kalmar Union of Denmark, Norway and Sweden in 1397 because – as he says – the following period ought to be represented by a history common for all three nations. Feldborg continues Baden's history by adding a collection of extracts – the forty-six pages – from Holberg's *History of Denmark*. In itself, this is a piece of rubbish worth mentioning only for the sake of curiosity and completeness.

We do not know the name of the translator of the autobiographical work *Memoirs of Lewis Holberg* (1827).<sup>34</sup> In the preface there is some inadequate information, and this may lead us to the conclusion that he is not familiar with Danish culture – he even mistakes Norway for Sweden!<sup>35</sup> His critical attitude to the text is manifested in reasoned editorial dispositions. There are a few explanatory notes, some of these corrective. As for the translation, the editor excludes what he calls 'a few coarse pleasantries by which the fastidiousness of some readers might have been offended'. He has also removed 'a considerable mass of quotations, for which, like the pedantic but pleasant author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* [Robert Burton] Holberg seems to have had an overweening affection'.<sup>36</sup> This English trope about the melancholy Dane may say more about the translation than the mistakes.

The original Latin version of Holberg's *Memoires* consists of three letters to an illustrious gentleman (cf. chapter 2). This gentleman is a fiction but until 1870 there were several suggestions about his identity. The English editor's sound critical attitude to the text avoids such futile speculations and removes the letter form:

As this account of the Life of Holberg was published in the lifetime of the writer, and was evidently intended for the information of the public, and not of his anonymous correspondent, we have thought it better, in the translation, to sink the epistolary form, and to suppose the writer to address the public, for whom his communications were really intended.<sup>37</sup>

Nearly one and a half centuries after the first English edition, a second edition of *Memoirs* appeared, with a suggestive subtitle 'an eighteenth century Danish contribution to international understanding'. In addition to the three epistles, it includes a fourth letter from the fifth and final collection of Holberg's *Epistles*, Epistola 447, covering the last years of his life. The editor, Stewart E. Fraser, uses the translation from the 1827-edition, and the previously untranslated fourth letter is translated from Danish by Eva Zachariae. Footnotes have been added to elucidate the text by relating 'directly to Holberg's contemporaries or to lesser known figures in history'.<sup>38</sup>

The 1970 edition is well equipped with illustrations and also with an annotated list of English language works, a chronology, a solid introduction to



Holberg's life and works and an index. All in all, this is a good introduction to Holberg and his writings, but, the bibliographic information is now out of date. Compared to the 1827 edition, the attitude is less critical, more panegyric. This is manifested by the meaningless subtitle and embarrassing statements such as: 'Holberg was, with the exception of Voltaire, the most prominent European writer of his generation'.<sup>39</sup>

As explained in chapter 6, the mock-heroic poem *Peder Paars* from 1719–20 had a complicated publication history, but once in its final shape, it acquired some international life. Holberg reports with satisfaction on '[*Peder Paars*] that celebrated heroi-comic poem which is now read and committed to memory even by Swedes and Germans, whom its popularity has induced to learn the Danish language'.<sup>40</sup> But in spite of that, the translations of *Peder Paars* into other languages, including English, must have happened against his will. He advises against translation, 'for such writings always lose their virtue in foreign clothes'.<sup>41</sup>

There are translations into English both of excerpts and of the whole work. An anonymous article from 1836 presents the story and gives specimens of selected passages. The author of this article praises Holberg extravagantly:

One of the most multifarious and at the same time universally successful writers in the literary annals of any nation, was Lewis Holberg. Excellent alike as a historian, a dramatist, a satirist and a poet, to say nothing of his merits as a biographer and a moral and political philosopher, he has left behind him a splendid example of what may be achieved by genius and perseverance [. . .].<sup>42</sup>

The translation, he says, is as close as is possible in metre. He does not seem to see any problems here; on the contrary, he stresses that the similarity of the two languages 'is often so great that many expressions which may appear to be exclusively English are rendered literally from the Danish'. Nevertheless, he is aware of difficulties English readers will face in *Peder Paars*. Details in scenes and dialogue will be difficult to cope with; they will 'require too frequent reference to a commentary, to be read with enjoyment'.<sup>43</sup>

A new booklet-edition from 1862 comprises the two first cantos of Book 1.<sup>44</sup> This edition contains nothing but specimens of Holberg's verse in English dress, and there is no presentation or explanation of any kind.<sup>45</sup>

A new edition of the poem translated by Bergliot Stromsoe and introduced by Børge Gedsø Madsen appeared in 1962.<sup>46</sup> The edition is still incomplete, inasmuch as the prefaces of Hans Mickelsen and Just Justesen as well as Justesen's (very) learned notes are left out. The editor justifies these deletions by saying: 'the notes do not have the interest they had for Holberg's contemporaries'.<sup>47</sup> However, the deletion certainly reduces the element of both satire and parody drastically.



### The nineteenth and twentieth centuries: *Comedies*

Most people will agree that the comedies are the high point of Holberg's works. Some will even add – as does Sven Hakon Rossel – that they represent 'one of the all-time great achievements of European drama'.<sup>48</sup> If so, it is surprising that the English-speaking world had to wait one and a half centuries before a single comedy was translated. A few translations of single comedies were published late in the nineteenth century, but on the whole, Holberg's comedies in English belong to the twentieth century; the first collection of select plays was printed in 1912.

*Erasmus Montanus* was the first play to be presented in English, in a scholar-edition in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1871.<sup>49</sup> The translator, Peter Toft, wrote a relatively comprehensive introduction. He includes Holberg among the world's greatest satirists and holds the comedies to be the best part of Holberg's work. His intention in translating the text is to give 'English readers some idea of the comic power of a writer whose production still delights audiences in the three Northern kingdoms, as they have done for more than one hundred years'.<sup>50</sup> In this comedy of the wise fool, many lines are from academic disputations in Latin but are mostly not translated in the explanatory notes. Some inaccuracies in the introduction<sup>51</sup> give the impression that the editor does not know our author very well.

A new translation of *Erasmus Montanus* was made by T. Weber to mark the 200th anniversary of Holberg's birthday, 3 December 1884, and to support the rebuilding of Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen after a major fire.<sup>52</sup> This is a reading edition; it includes some explanatory notes, mostly translations from Latin, and a very short biography.

One more translation by T. Weber was published in memory of Holberg's birthday: *The Blue-Apron Statesman* (better known by the title *The Political Tinker*). This too is a reading edition with some explanatory notes at the end. Perhaps more interesting is a last page announcement revealing some uncertainty concerning the demand for translations of Holberg-texts: 'As soon as "The Blue-Apron Statesman" gains the approbation of the public, it will be followed by others of Holberg's comedies (in English by T. Weber)'.<sup>53</sup>

A third piece, *Jeppe of the Hill*, was published separately 1906 by the Mimer Club of the University of North Dakota. (North Dakota is the state of the US that has the largest group of people of Norwegian descent.) The edition is illustrated, it includes introductions to both Holberg and *Jeppe of the Hill*, but there are no notes to the text.

By 1906 then, the three most widely known and popular comedies of Holberg had been translated. The first collection of (select) comedies was published in 1912 under the title *Three Comedies*, comprising *Henry and Pernilla*, *Captain Bombast Thunderton* and *Scatterbrains*, 'three of his most amusing, though not, perhaps, his best, comedies',<sup>54</sup> according to the translator Lieut.-Colonel H.W.L. Hime. There are comments to the texts, namely a



preface, notes and a concluding 'Note on Scatterbrains' discussing whether or not an absent-minded person – a scatterbrain – is a 'fit subject for comedy'.<sup>55</sup> Generally the notes are learned in an ostentatious manner, including a lot of references to parallels in the classical tradition. For example, Leonora's exclamation in *Henry and Pernilla* 'my whole body burns with the fever of revenge' (II.6) is amplified by a farfetched Nordic parallel: 'The spirit of the heroines of the Völsunga Saga breathes in these lines'.<sup>56</sup>

During the period 1914–1950, three further selections of comedies appeared, comprising fourteen comedies, and giving, all in all, a representative picture of Holberg's plays: First, *Comedies* (1914), including *Jeppe of the Hill*, *Erasmus Montanus* and *The Political Tinker*, with an introduction by Oscar James Campbell Jr., translated by him and Frederic Schenck.<sup>57</sup>

Secondly, *Four Plays* (1946, repr. 1971), including *The Fussy Man*, *The Masked Ladies*, *The Weathercock* and *Masquerades*, with an introduction by Oscar James Campbell Jr. and translated by Henry Alexander.

And finally *Seven One-Act Plays* (1950), including *The Talkative Barber*, *The Arabian Powder*, *The Christmas Party*, *Diderich the Terrible*, *The Peasant in Pawn*, *Scanarel's Journey to the Land of Philosophers*, *The Changed Bridegroom*, with an introduction by Svend Kragh-Jacobsen and translated by Henry Alexander.

These collections are reading editions, with introductions, but without notes. They are all published on the initiative of the American-Scandinavian Foundation (founded 1911). Preceding the title-page of the first collection (from 1914) there is a statement of purpose for the editions and more generally for the American-Scandinavian Foundation as a whole. This series of Scandinavian Classics is published by the American-Scandinavian Foundation in the belief that greater familiarity with the chief literary monuments of the North will help Americans to gain a better understanding of Scandinavians, and thus serve to stimulate their sympathetic cooperation to good ends.

In 1957, *Three Comedies*, was published, including *The Transformed Peasant* (i.e. *Jeppe of the Hill*), *The Arabian Powder* and *The Healing Spring*. Editor and translator was Reginald Spink (1905–94), a well-known translator and biographer, who in younger years had nourished theatrical ambitions.<sup>58</sup> At first sight, the book looks like a traditional reading edition – with a short introduction, without notes, not even translations of expressions in Latin. But the text is changed radically. According to the editor a literal translation is bound 'to lose the vigour and the freshness of the original'. Therefore: 'In communion with the spirit of Holberg [. . .] I have put the plays into plain modern English'. He has also condensed long opening monologues, increased stage directions etc., in order to facilitate the presentation of the plays on the stage.<sup>59</sup>

Below is a brief comparison of the opening lines of two translations of the one-act play *The Arabian Powder*, the one by Henry Alexander, the other by Reginald Spink.



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Henry Alexander (1950)

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Reginald Spink (1957)

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OLDFOX. This town isn't as small as I thought. There's a lot of fine houses; there must be some rich people living here. But look, I'll be damned if that isn't my old friend Andreas, that I haven't seen for so many years. Andreas! Is that you or your ghost?

ANDREAS. Oh, brother Oldfox, how lucky to find you here so unexpectedly! (*They embrace, kiss one another, and cry.*)

*The scene is a street outside POLIDOR'S house in a Danish provincial town, about 1720.*

*Enter Fox, looking interestingly around him; he is a stranger in the town and has just arrived.*

Fox: H'm, a bigger place than I thought. Nice houses in it, too. Should be some money about, by the look of it. (ANDREAS *enters from the other side, and Fox at once recognises an old crony*)

Why, if it isn't my old friend Andreas! Hullo there, Andreas, my lad! Is it you? Or only your ghost!

ANDREAS (*who is wearing a black fur cap pulled well down over his head and a black eye-shield*): Fox! Well, I never! Fancy meeting you here! It's ages since I clapped eyes on you! How are you, Foxey, old man? Glad to see you! (*And they shake hands reunion.*)

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*Jeppe of the Hill* was included in a reader on Scandinavian theatre in 1964, edited by Evert Sprinchorn.<sup>60</sup> The book includes a general introduction to Scandinavian theatre and a short introduction to *Jeppe of the Hill*, in addition to a substantial essay on Holberg by Georg Brandes. The text of *Jeppe of the Hill* is a reprint of Oscar James Campbell's translation from *Comedies* 1914.

The editions of Holberg's plays in English mentioned so far have all been published by presses said to be of small distribution.<sup>61</sup> They are to be found mainly in university libraries but have not been readily accessible for a broader public. The first collection aiming at a broader audience is *Jeppe of the Hill and Other Comedies*,<sup>62</sup> printed both as hard cover and paperback. It is translated, edited and introduced by two Holberg-scholars, Gerald S. Argetsinger and Sven Hakon Rossel. The edition aims at a representative picture of Holberg's comedies. In addition to the unavoidable triad – *Jeppe of the Hill*, *The Political Tinker*, *Erasmus Montanus* – the collection includes *Jean de France* and *Ulysses von Ithacia* and three one-act plays. There are two general introductions, one by Rossel on the cultural context of the plays, the other by Argetsinger on Holberg's comic aesthetics. The edition has brief introductions to the comedies and explanatory notes. This is a solid one-volume gateway to Holberg's comedies.



A student-edition of *Erasmus Montanus*, translated by Petter Næss, was published by The University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1989.<sup>63</sup> The introduction includes a list of Holberg's works in English and a background essay on university education in Holberg's time.

Finally, by the close of the century, *Jeppe of the Hill* and *Scatterbrain* were included in another collection of *Three Danish Comedies*, the third one by Johan Ludvig Heiberg.<sup>64</sup> This is a reader-edition; it includes a brief introduction, but no notes.

### The nineteenth and twentieth centuries: *Essays*

Holberg wrote more than 600 essays, the majority of which were published in two collections, *Moral Reflections* (63 longer essays) and *Epistles* (539 short essays). Although they constitute a substantial and an important part of his writings, they were not accessible in English translation until P.M. Mitchell's selection from *Epistles* appeared in 1955.<sup>65</sup> It includes 49 essays chosen from Holberg's *Epistles*. In her review, Carol K. Bang says it is a pity there was not room for a few more.<sup>66</sup> More epistles were to come some years later in an edition including also essays from *Moral Reflections*.<sup>67</sup> In addition to general introductions, both editions have notes explaining the numerous references to historical, theological and philosophical sources. These annotations are based on the Danish scholar F.J. Billeskov Jansen's authoritative editions of Holberg's essays.<sup>68</sup>

### Conclusion

The English translations detailed above mirror three or maybe rather two and a half stages in Holberg's literary destiny which *mutatis mutandis* also apply to other languages. During the eighteenth century a few titles were translated and adapted to the English book market for commercial reasons, with evident success for at least one of his two academic textbooks, but with mixed results for *Niels Klim*. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the dynamics behind the English translations change in step with the growing interest in literary history and in the nourishing of national sentiment (especially among emigrants of Scandinavian descent). This development maintains interest in *Niels Klim* but leaves out the textbooks. First and foremost, it includes the core material of the by now established Danish Holberg tradition, *Peder Paars*, the autobiography and a growing selection of comedies. After WWII a third, more scholarly phase began which has led to higher quality editions as well as to an ambition to present 'the whole Holberg', e.g. also Holberg the essayist. Both of these new developments are incomplete in as much as many core texts are still not available in satisfactory translations and central parts of his oeuvre have yet to appear in English.



## Notes

- 1 H. Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi over Holbergs skrifter*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen: 1933–5), vol. 3, 213–326. See also Peter Fitting, ‘Preface’, in Holberg, *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground*, ed. J. I. McNelis Jr, (Lincoln, NE: 2004), v–xvii.
- 2 Philip Babcock Gove, *The Imaginary Voyage in Prose Fiction: A History of its Criticism and a Guide for its Study, with an Annotated Check List of 215 Imaginary Voyages from 1700 to 1800* (New York: 1941), 303–305.
- 3 This includes both reprints and new editions and translations. The latest Danish translation, by Peter Zeeberg, appeared in 2014.
- 4 *A Journey to the World Under-Ground*. By Nicolas Klimius. Translated from the Original (London: 1742).
- 5 Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi*, vol. 3, 307–309.
- 6 Gove, *Imaginary Voyage*, lists 215 titles from 1700–1800.
- 7 *Popular Romances: Consisting of Imaginary Voyages and Travels* [. . .] to which is prefixed an Introductory Dissertation, by Henry Weber, Esq. (Edinburgh: 1812). For Niels Klim, see pages 116–202.
- 8 Weber, Introductory Dissertation, xxx–xxxi.
- 9 *Journey to the World Under Ground; Being the Subterraneous Travels of Niels Klim*, from the Latin of Lewis Holberg (London: 1828).
- 10 Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi*, vol. 3, 310–311.
- 11 *The Literary Gazette*, (London: 1828), 487.
- 12 *Niels Klim’s Journey Under the Ground: Being a Narrative of His Wonderful Descent to the Subterranean Lands together with an Account of the Sensible Animals and Trees inhabiting the Planet Nazar and the Firmament*, by Louis Holberg; transl. John Gierlow; with a Sketch of the Author’s Life (Boston: 1845).
- 13 Gierlow, Sketch, xiv.
- 14 *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground*, by Ludvig Holberg; ed., introd. James I. McNelis, Jr. (Lincoln, NE: 1960).
- 15 Op. cit., 233.
- 16 Op. cit., Jr., 234.
- 17 Op. cit., xxi.
- 18 *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground*, by Ludvig Holberg; ed., introd. James I. McNelis, Jr., 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE: 2004). Foreword by Peter Fitting, vi.
- 19 *An Introduction to Universal History*, trans., with notes historical, chronological, and critical, by Gregory Sharpe [. . .]. (London: 1755). Sharpe probably translates from the fourth Latin edition, 1749, cf. Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi*, vol. 1, 237.
- 20 *An Introduction to Universal History*, trans., with notes historical, chronological and critical, by Gregory Sharpe. [. . .]. (London: 1758). And the same in ‘A new edition, revised, corrected, and improved (London: 1787).
- 21 Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi* I, 231f.
- 22 *An Introduction to Universal History*, ed. 1755, 257.
- 23 *Synopsis historiae universalis*, 146; cf. Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi*, vol. 1, 237.
- 24 *An Introduction to Universal History*, ed. 1755, 257.
- 25 The original Latin text *Compendium geographicum* was first published 1733.
- 26 *An Introduction to Universal History*, ed. 1758, 163–166.
- 27 Op. cit., 234–246.
- 28 Op. cit., 222.
- 29 Op. cit., 117
- 30 *An Introduction to Universal History*, ed. 1755, viii.



- 31 *An Introduction to Universal History*, ed. 1755, v–vi, xii–xiii. Works referred to are William Howell, *An Institution of General History* (1661); Thomas Hearne, *Ductor Historicus: or, a Short System of Universal History, and an Introduction to the Study of it* (1704–5). Cf. Seth Rudy, *Literature and Encyclopedism in Enlightenment Britain* (Houndmills: 2014), 86–87. ‘The celebrated Bishop of Meaux’ is J. Bénigne Bossuet, whose work *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* (1681) was translated as *An Introduction to, or a Short Discourse concerning, Universal History* (London: 1730). Pareus probably refers to David Pareus, *Chronologiae sacrae ex sola historia sacra accuratissime constructa libri tres* (1641).
- 32 *An Introduction to Universal History*, ed. 1755, x.
- 33 Gustav L. Baden, *Det Norske Riges Historie. En haandbog* (Copenhagen: 1804).
- 34 *Memoirs of Lewis Holberg*, written by himself in Latin: and now first translated into English (London: 1827).
- 35 He wrongly gives 1737 as year of publication of the original (156) and refers to a non-existent further work on natural law by Holberg (v–vi).
- 36 Op. cit., vi.
- 37 Op. cit., vi.
- 38 *Ludvig Holberg’s Memoirs: An Eighteenth Century Danish Contribution to International Understanding*, ed. Stewart E. Fraser (Leiden: 1970), 18.
- 39 Op. cit., 9–10.
- 40 *Memoirs of Lewis Holberg*, 1827, 91.
- 41 *Ludvig Holberg’s Memoirs*, 1970, 268.
- 42 Quoted in Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi*, vol. 2, 120.
- 43 Quoted in Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi*, vol. 2, 121.
- 44 Ehrencron-Müller, *Bibliografi*, vol. 2, 121–122. *Peter Paars, Canto I–II*. Freely translated from the Danish, of Ludvig Holberg. Translator possibly J.H. Sharman (s.l.: 1862).
- 45 I have found only a single note to the text of Canto 1.
- 46 *Peder Paars*; trans. Bergliot Stromsoe; introduction by Børge Gedsø Madsen (Lincoln, NE: 1962).
- 47 Op. cit., xiii.
- 48 *Ludvig Holberg: A European Writer. A Study in Influence and Reception*, ed. Rossel, Sven Hakon, (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: 1994), vi.
- 49 *Fraser’s Magazine* (London: 1871). This was a general and literary journal 1830–82.
- 50 Op. cit., 71.
- 51 E.g. *Niels Klim* is misleadingly called a poem, and the first English translation was in 1742, not 1728.
- 52 *Erasmus Montanus; or, Rasmus Berg, a Comedy in Five Acts*, trans. T. Weber (Copenhagen: 1885). The publisher was ‘T. Weber’s Academy’ and the title-page has this inscription: ‘The gross-amount of the sale of this comedy is given to the fund for the re-building of Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen.’
- 53 *The Blue-Apron Statesman*, trans. T. Weber (Copenhagen: 1885).
- 54 *Three Comedies by Ludvig Holberg*, translated from the Danish by lieut.-colonel H.W.L. Hime (London: 1912), Preface, x.
- 55 Op. cit., 207.
- 56 Op. cit., 37 (*Henry and Pernilla*, II.6).
- 57 The same year, Oscar James Campbell published a monograph on Holberg, the first of its kind in English, *The Comedies of Holberg* (Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, vol. III) (Cambridge, MA: 1914; reissued New York: 1968). Reviews by J.G. Robertson, *The Modern Language Review*, 11 (1916): 109–114; and by Carl S. Petersen, *Historisk tidsskrift*, 8. rk., V (1914–15): 460–463.
- 58 Graeme Wright, ‘Obituary: Reginald Spink’, *Independent* 23 Oct. 2011.



- 59 *Three Comedies by Ludvig Holberg*. English text and introduction by Reginald Spink (Melbourne: 1957), 3.
- 60 *The Genius of Scandinavian Theatre*, ed. and introd. Evert Sprinchorn (New York: 1964). Brandes' essay, 'Ludvig Holberg and the Neoclassic Spirit' is excerpts from his *Ludvig Holberg: Et Festskrift* (Copenhagen: 1884), 157–194, trans. E. Sprinchorn.
- 61 Alan Swanson, review of Ludvig Holberg, *Jeppe of the Hill, and Other Comedies*, in *Scandinavian Studies* 64 (1992): 157–159.
- 62 *Jeppe of the Hill and Other Comedies by Ludvig Holberg* trans. Gerald S. Argetsinger and Sven H. Rossel (Carbondale, IL: 1990).
- 63 Ludvig Holberg, *Erasmus Montanus*, trans. Petter Næss (Madison, WI: 1989).
- 64 *Three Danish Comedies. Johan Ludvig Heiberg: 'No'; Ludvig Holberg: 'Jeppe of the Hill', 'The Scatterbrain'*, trans. Michael Meyer (London: 1999).
- 65 Ludvig Holberg, *Selected Essays*, ed. P.M. Mitchell (Lawrence, AR: 1955. Reprint 1976).
- 66 Carol K. Bang, review of Ludvig Holberg, *Selected Essays*, in *Modern Language Notes*, 72 (1957).
- 67 Ludvig Holberg, *Moral Reflections and Epistles*, ed. P.M. Mitchell and F.J. Billeskov Jansen (Norwich: 1991).
- 68 Ludvig Holberg, *Epistler*, 8. vols., ed. F.J. Billeskov Jansen (Copenhagen. 1944–54); and *Moralske Tanker*, ed. F.J. Billeskov Jansen (Copenhagen: 1943).



# Bibliographies

For the sake of clarity, we have divided the bibliographical information into three parts. The first bibliography, 'Holberg's original works with English titles', lists the works that appeared in Holberg's life-time and which have been referred to in the present work. These works are all to be found in the new collected edition of Holberg that is available on the internet at [www.holbergsskrifter.dk](http://www.holbergsskrifter.dk) and at [www.holbergsskrifter.no](http://www.holbergsskrifter.no). This is thus our main reference throughout the work. Alongside the original titles we list our English translations of Holberg's titles.

Several of Holberg's more popular works have been published under a variety of titles, and when any of these have been used in the text, they will be found in the second bibliography, 'Other editions of Holberg'. This list contains the critical editions of individual works, a significant number of the translations into English and some translations into other languages that have played a role in our text. Needless to say, there are a great many more translations, especially into German.

The third bibliography, 'Other literature', lists all other literature referred to in this book, including those contributions to the critical discussion of Holberg that we have had occasion to refer to in our presentation. It should be stressed that the critical literature in Danish and Norwegian is vast, and that we have had to strike a balance between appropriate acknowledgement of this literature and due regard for the international audience to whom this work primarily is addressed.



# 1. Holberg’s original works with English titles

Unless otherwise indicated, the place of publication is Copenhagen.

<i>Introduction til de fornemste Europæiske Rigers Historie</i> (1711)	<i>Introduction to the History of the Most Prominent European States</i>
<i>Anhang til hans Historiske Introduction</i> (1713)	<i>Appendix to His Historical Introduction</i>
<i>Dissertatio V de historicis Danicis</i> (1719)	<i>Fifth Dissertation on Danish Historians</i>
<i>Dissertatio juridica de nuptiis propinquorum</i> (1719)	<i>Juridical dissertation on marriage of the closely related</i>
<i>Peder Paars</i> (1719–20)	<i>Peder Paars</i>
<i>Programma Universitatis Hafniensis</i> (1720)	<i>Programme of the University of Copenhagen</i>
<i>Fire Skæmtedigte</i> (1722): ‘Democritus og Heraclitus’ ‘Apologie for Sangeren Tigellius’ ‘Critique over Peder Paars’ ‘Zille Hans Dotters Gynaicologia eller Forsvars Skrift for Qvindekjønnen’	<i>Four Satirical Poems [including:]</i> ‘Democritus and Heraclitus’ ‘Apology for the Bard Tigellius’ ‘Critique of Peder Paars’ ‘Zille Hans-daughter’s Gynaicologia or Defence of Womankind’
<i>Nye-Aars Prologus til en Comoedie</i> (1723)	<i>New Year’s Prologue to a Comedy</i>
Komedier og relaterede tekster: <i>Hans Mickelsens Comoedier</i> , 3 vols: Vol I (1723)	Comedies and related texts: <i>Hans Mickelsen’s Comedies</i> , 3 vols: Vol. I (1723)
Fortale til Hans Mickelsens Comoedier Just Justesens Betænkning over Comoedier	<i>Preface to Hans Mickelsen’s Comedies</i> <i>Just Justesen’s Deliberation on Comedies</i>
<i>Den Politiske Kandestøber</i>	<i>The Political Tinker</i>
<i>Den Vægelsindede</i>	<i>The Vacillating Woman</i>
<i>Jean de France</i>	<i>Jean de France</i>
<i>Jeppe paa Bierget</i>	<i>Jeppe of the Hill</i>
<i>Hans Mickelsens Comoedier</i> , 3 vols: Vol. II (1724)	<i>Hans Mickelsen’s Comedies</i> , 3 vols: Vol. II (1724)
<i>Den 11. Junii</i>	<i>11th of June</i>
<i>Mascarade</i>	<i>Masquerade</i>
<i>Jacob von Thyboe</i>	<i>Jacob von Thyboe</i>
<i>Hans Mickelsens Comoedier</i> , 3 vols: Vol. III (1725)	<i>Hans Mickelsen’s Comedies</i> , 3 vols: Vol. III (1725)
<i>Ulysses von Ithacia</i>	<i>Ulysses von Ithacia</i>
<i>Uden Hoved og Hale</i>	<i>Without Head and Tail</i>
<i>Den danske Skue-Plads</i> Vol I (1731):	<i>The Danish Theatre</i> Vol. I (1731):
Fortale	Preface
<i>Den Vægelsindede</i>	<i>The Vacillating Woman</i>
<i>Hexerie eller Blind Allarm</i>	<i>Witchcraft or False Alarm</i>
<i>Det lykkelige Skibbrud</i>	<i>The Happy Shipwreck</i>
<i>Erasmus Montanus</i>	<i>Erasmus Montanus</i>



<i>Den danske Skue-Plads</i> Vol. VI (1753): Fortale <i>Plutus</i>	<i>The Danish Theatre</i> Vol. VI (1753): Preface <i>Plutus</i>
<i>Den danske Skue-Plads</i> Vol. VII (1754): <i>Philosophus udi egen Indbildning</i> <i>Holger Danskes Brev til Burman</i> (1727) <i>Metamorphosis eller Forvandlinger</i> (Copenhagen: 1726)	<i>The Danish Theatre</i> Vol. VII (1754): <i>Philosopher in Own Imagination</i> <i>Holger Danske's Letter to Burman</i> <i>Metamorphosis or Transformations</i>
Levnedsbreve: 1. <i>Ad virum perillustrem epistola</i> (Copenhagen: 1728) 2. 'Ad virum perillustrem epistola' secunda, in <i>Ludovici Holbergii</i> <i>Opuscula quædam Latina</i> (Leipzig: 1737), 213–228 3. 'Ad virum perillustrem epistola tertia', in <i>Lud. Holbergii Opusculorum</i> <i>Latinorum pars altera</i> (1743), 1–192	Autobiographical Letters: <i>First Autobiographical Letter</i>  'Second Autobiographical Letter'  'Third Autobiographical Letter'
<i>Dannemarks og Norges Beskrivelse</i> (1729); expanded 2nd ed. as <i>Dannemarks og Norges Verdslige og</i> <i>Geistlige Staat</i> (1749)	<i>Description of Denmark and</i> <i>Norway</i> ; expanded 2nd ed. as <i>The Spiritual and Secular State of</i> <i>Denmark and Norway</i>
<i>De hypothesibus historiæ Danicæ</i> (1731)	<i>On Hypotheses on Danish History</i>
<i>Dannemarks Riges Historie</i> , 3 vols. (1732–5); 'Betænkning over historier' in vol. 3, a1r – c1v	<i>History of Denmark</i> ; 'Deliberation on Histories' in vol. 3, a1r – c1v
<i>Betænkning om Conventikler</i> (1733, publ. 1755)	<i>Deliberation on Conventicles</i>
<i>Synopsis historiæ universalis</i> (1733)	<i>Synopsis of Universal History</i>
<i>Compendium geographicum</i> (1733)	<i>Compendium to Geography</i>
<i>Den Berømmelige Norske Handels-Stad</i> <i>Bergens Beskrivelse</i> (1737)	<i>Description of the Famous</i> <i>Norwegian Trading City Bergen</i>
<i>Almindelig Kierke-Historie fra</i> <i>Christendommens første Begyndelse</i> <i>til Lutheri Reformation</i> 2 vols. (1738)	<i>General Church History from the</i> <i>first Beginnings of Christianity to</i> <i>Luther's Reformation</i>
<i>Adskillige Store Heltes og Berømmelige</i> <i>Mænds, sær Orientalske og</i> <i>Indianske sammenlignede Historier</i> <i>og Bedrifter efter Plutarchi Maade</i> 2 vols. (1739)	<i>The Lives and Accomplishments of</i> <i>Several Heroes and Notable Men,</i> <i>especially Oriental and Indian,</i> <i>Compared after Plutarch's</i> <i>Method</i>
<i>Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum</i> (Copenhagen, Leipzig: 1741)	<i>Niels Klim's Travels Underground</i>

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<i>Jødisk Historie fra Verdens Første Begyndelse fortsat til disse Tider</i> 2 vols (1742)	<i>Jewish History from the first Beginnings of the World continued to the Present Times</i>
Fortale til Peder von Haven, <i>Reise udi Rusland</i> (1743)	Preface to Peder von Haven, <i>Travels in Russia</i>
<i>Moralske Tanker</i> 2 vols (1744)	<i>Moral Reflections</i>
<i>Adskillige Heltinder og Navnkundige Damers Sammenlignede Historier efter Plutarchi Maade</i> 2 vols (1745)	<i>The Lives of Several Heroines and Renowned Women Compared after Plutarch's Method</i>
<i>Danmarks og Norges Søe-Historie. Første Periodus</i> (1747)	<i>The Maritime History of Denmark and Norway. First Period</i>
<i>Epistler befattende Adskillige Historiske, Politiske, Metaphysiske, Moralske, Philosophiske Item Skiemtsomme Materier</i> 5 vols (1748–54): Vol. I (1748): Ep. 1–81 Vol. II (1748): Ep. 82–183 Vol. III (1750): Ep. 184–299 Vol. IV (1750): Ep. 300–446 Vol. V (1754): 447–539	<i>Epistles Containing Numerous Historical, Political, Metaphysical, Moral, Philosophical as well as Amusing Subjects</i>
<i>Epigrammatum libri septem</i> (1749)	<i>Seven Books of Epigrams</i>
<i>Moralske Fabler</i> (1751)	<i>Moral Fables</i>
<i>Conjectures sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains</i> (1752)	<i>Conjectures on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans</i>
<i>Lettre sur les mémoires concernant la Reine Christine</i> (1552)	<i>Letter on the Mémoires concerning Queen Christine</i>
<i>Remarques sur quelques positions, qui se trouvent dans l'Esprit des loix</i> (1753)	<i>Remarks on Certain Standpoints in the Spirit of Laws</i>

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